

“You Can Make Me Clean”: The Matthean Jesus as Priest and the Biblical-Theological Results

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *munus triplex* is an important biblical-theological and systematic category. While it is common to observe in the Gospels Jesus’ role as “the prophet who is to come into the world” (Jn 6:14; cf., also Matt 17:5 and parallels vis-à-vis Deut 18:15) and the royal “Son of David” (cf., esp. Matt 1:1; 21:9), theologians often turn to Hebrews for Christ’s priestly office. Lately, however, scholars are increasingly appreciating the historical Jesus’ self-consciousness as *a priest*.¹ The result is to bring more attention to the Gospels for understanding Jesus’ *munus sacerdotal*. This essay singles out Matthew specifically where Jesus is presented as

¹Citing a handful of exceptions, Brant Pitre rightly observes, “If there is any single subject which modern historical scholarship on Jesus has almost completely neglected, it is the subject of Jesus and the Jewish priesthood.” See “Jesus, the New Temple, and the New Priesthood,” in *Letter and Spirit*, vol 4., *Temple and Contemplation: God’s Presence in the Cosmos, Church, and Human Heart*, ed. Scott Hahn and David Scott (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2008), 71. Also Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis has outlined several reasons for the prior neglect of this subject, and contributed greatly to redressing it. See his “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4 (2006), 155–75; idem., “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 5 (2007), 57–79.

Israel's eschatological priest.² From this flows several biblical-theological considerations.

There are several reasons why scholars dismiss Christ's earthly priesthood. Linguistically, in all four Gospels, Jesus is not once called a priest.³ Covenantally, Christ does not qualify as a priest. Born under the old covenant, Jesus' Judean lineage would disallow him from serving in the temple.⁴ Theologically, there is strong reason for denying Christ's earthly priesthood: his priestly service would come to depend upon his resurrection and his appointment as a better priest.⁵ This is the argument in Hebrews. Philosophically, since the Enlightenment there has been an academic aversion towards any notion of "priest-craft."⁶ Proportionately, due to the extensive attention given to other aspects of Jesus' person and work, it is understandable how Christ's priesthood would be overlooked. For these reasons and more, the idea that Christ is a priest *in the Gospels* is underrepresented.⁷

It is our contention, however, joining a growing chorus, that the Gospels are filled with evidence for Christ's earthly priesthood. In contrast to the linguistic analysis of Vanhoye,⁸ we agree with Jonathan Wilson who contends that we miss much of who Jesus is when we limit our analysis to lexemes. He notes, "If we look at Jesus' life in light of the larger responsibilities of the priesthood, then we see Jesus as priest in much of his preaching and in many of his actions."⁹

While we would argue that all four Gospels contribute to the mosaic of Jesus' priesthood, we will limit ourselves here to a more modest thesis: Christ does function as a priest in Matthew as the operations of the temple and its officers are relocated from the Jerusalem edifice to Jesus himself.

²Jesus is not "presented" exclusively as a priest in Matthew, but as prophet, priest, and king. The onus of this essay is to show the ways he functions as a priest.

³A word search through the Gospels and Acts finds 122 occurrences of "priestly terminology" (priest, high priest, priesthood, etc.). However, the number of times that such language refers to Christ or Christians is *zero*, which would understandably lead anyone dependent on that method of research to abandon the effort. E.g., see Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest: According to the New Testament*, trans. J. Benard Orchard, (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1986), 63–66.

⁴Technically, if Karl Deenick is correct that 1 Samuel 2:35 points to a Davidic priest ("Priest and King or Priest-King in 1 Samuel 2:35," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 [2011], 325–39), Jesus' Davidic lineage would not disqualify him from priesthood. It would do the opposite. But it is still necessary to show, as Hebrews 5 does, how a son of David could supersede the Levitical priesthood.

⁵See David Schrock, "Resurrection and Priesthood: Christological Soundings from the Book of Hebrews," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18, no. 4 (2014), 89–114.

⁶Peter J. Leithart, "Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 85 (1999), 3–4.

⁷For a survey of how scholars understand Christ's priesthood in the gospels, see Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1," 155–75; idem., "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2," 57–79.

⁸Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, 47–55; see also Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1," 155–58.

⁹Jonathan R. Wilson, *God So Loved the World: A Christology for Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 51.

Thus, while devoid of the title “priest,” in Matthew Jesus acts as a priest—one who far exceeds the old covenant Levites. We will particularly demonstrate this through the intertextual links to the Old Testament in chapter 8.

II. RECENT STUDIES

As we approach this subject, there are at least three recent studies worth mentioning at the outset.¹⁰ The most comprehensive is that of Crispin Fletcher-Louis.¹¹ He has argued that the first six chapters of Mark’s Gospel intend to put Jesus’ priestly actions on display.¹² He enumerates the following reasons for observing Christ’s priesthood: First, the title “the Holy of One of God” (Mk 1:24)—as used of Aaron (Ps 106:16)—denotes Jesus’ priesthood.¹³ Second, Jesus’ “contagious holiness” is a mark of his greater priesthood (1:41; 3:10; 5:25–34; 6:56).¹⁴ Third, the use of the term “Son of Man” equally suggests a priestly figure.¹⁵ This is evinced by Jesus’ offer of forgiveness (2:10)¹⁶ and his “priestly prerogative over the Sabbath” (2:28).¹⁷ Fourth, the language of

¹⁰This list does not include the older works of Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* and André Feuillet, *The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

¹¹Fletcher-Louis, “The High Priest as Divine Mediator,” 161–93; idem., “God’s Image, His Cosmic Temple and the High Priest: Towards an Historical and Theological Account of the Incarnation,” in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 81–99; idem., “Jesus Inspects His Priestly War Party (Luke 14.25–35),” in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North*, ed. Steve Moyise, JSNTSup 189 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 126–43. For a full bibliography, see Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1,” 158.

¹²Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 63.

¹³Ibid., 63–64.

¹⁴Ibid., 64–70; Bruce Chilton, *Jesus’ Baptism and Jesus’ Healing: His Personal Practice of Spirituality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 58–97.

¹⁵Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 71–77. See also Joel Marcus, “Son of Man as Son of Adam,” *Revue Biblique* 110 (2003): 38–61; idem., “Son of Man as Son of Adam, Part II: Exegesis,” *Revue Biblique* 110 (2003): 370–86, who argues that language of “Son of Man” carries priestly connotations.

¹⁶In systematics, Christ’s forgiveness of sins is usually taken as evidence of his divinity (Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus Divine Messiah: The New and Old Testament Witness* [Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2003], 244). A priestly reading of this text does not deny this reality. As the Eternal Son and “Son of Man,” Christ’s offer of forgiveness comes from his whole person.

¹⁷Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 75. Corresponding to the way chapter 6 presented the effect of the Davidic covenant on the OT priesthood, Fletcher-Louis writes, “The behavior of David and his men would provide a precedent therefore for Jesus and his disciples acting as priests *if the latter were in the temple in Jerusalem*. But they are in a Galilean cornfield. The David story only provides a precedent if the Galilean cornfield has the legal status of the Temple (or Tabernacle).” But indeed, the grain field in Galilee becomes a table holding the bread of the presence, because Christ, the greater temple, is in their midst. Fletcher-Louis concludes, “Jesus justifies his disciples’

Mark 1:15 and the announcement that the kingdom has “drawn near” suggests a sacral kingdom,¹⁸ not merely a political one.¹⁹ However, above all these priestly indicators, there is the reality that Jesus’ mission on earth included the express purpose to cast out unclean spirits and “cleanse” his Father’s house. These actions show Jesus’ priesthood is not reducible to sacrifice and intercession. Rather, like the priests of old, Jesus teaches God’s covenant people and “purifies/protects” the temple (cf., Lev 10:11; Num 3:6–7, 32, 38; 18:1–7; Deut 33:8–11), even as he offers a final sacrifice for his people (Mark 10:45).

Nicholas Perrin has observed Jesus’ priestly ministry as well.²⁰ In his book *Jesus the Temple*, Perrin posits, “Jesus of Nazareth saw himself and his movement as nothing less than the decisive embodiment of Yahweh’s eschatological temple.”²¹ In defending his thesis, Perrin shows how the priesthood and temple are mutually-interpreting, and how Christ is the new covenant priest. Appealing to Jesus’ actions in the temple, he suggests that the best interpretation for Mark 11:17 is one that unites Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. In cleansing the temple, Jesus intended to bring a “prophetic indictment” against the temple and its priests, and he also sought to announce his own eschatological agenda of rebuilding it.²² Perrin, therefore, explains that by exposing the temple’s failed priesthood Jesus was positioning himself to fill the vacuum as the long-awaited priestly messiah.

breach of the Sabbath because he claims to be a sacral king and high priestly Son of Man. Where *he* is, in that place there is the transcendent liturgical space and time of the true temple in which his disciples can legitimately act as priests,” (Ibid., 77).

¹⁸“For Mark the point is that the reality of God’s presence that has hitherto been present primarily in the temple and her priesthood is now available not (just) in Jerusalem but also in the towns and villages of Galilee. Those who go to the temple to worship ‘draw near’ (to God) (Ex 16:9; Lev 9:5; Deut 4:11; Ps 65:5 [4]; cf., Ex 12:48; 4Q400 1 i 6). And those who are ordained are similarly drawn near (Priests: Ex 40:12, 14; Lev 7:35; 8:6, 13, 24; Levites: Num 3:6; 8:9, 10). So, in a narrow sense, only those ordained can draw near to God (Num 16:5, 9, 10; 17:5; Lev 21:17). Now, according to Mark’s Jesus, with the eschatological arrival of the Kingdom of God, the potent reality of God’s presence has proactively drawn near to his people. They no longer need to go to him in Jerusalem to encounter the Kingdom because its reality (forgiveness of sins, the temple’s experience of Sabbath rest and contagious healing holiness) are coming to them” (Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 78).

¹⁹Noting the priestly nature of the kingdom and its gradual installation, Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss comment, “The kingdom is realized not through conquest but through sacrifice. It will be consummated when he returns in power and glory” (*Mark*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 711). Of course, theologically, Christ’s death on the cross achieves forgiveness of sins and subdues evil (Sinclair Ferguson, “Christus Victor et Propitiator: The Death of Christ, Substitute and Conqueror,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 171–89).

²⁰Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*. His forthcoming book, *Jesus the Priest* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) will surely develop this theme in even greater ways.

²¹Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 12.

²²Ibid., 92.

Brant Pitre has also argued for Christ's priesthood in the Gospels on the basis of the Jewish matrix of temple, worship, sacrifice, and priesthood.²³ He writes, "If, for an ancient Jew, it would have been absurd to speak of religious worship without sacrifice, then it would be equally absurd to speak of sacrifice without priesthood."²⁴ And yet in current scholarship, Pitre detects a vast lacuna. Aiming to redress the situation, he suggests that Jesus saw himself and his followers as a new priesthood.²⁵

To argue his case, Pitre gives three examples from the Gospels. First, like Perrin, he appeals to the cleansing of the temple (Mk 11:15–16). He indicates how this action, with Isaiah 56:7 on Jesus' lips, has priestly implications. Since the context of Isaiah (56:6–8) includes reference to Gentiles ministering in the house of God, Jesus "not only speaks of an eschatological Temple" that he is bringing, but "also of a *new priesthood*."²⁶ Pitre reinforces his argument by appealing to the *Testament of Levi* 18:1–14, which expects "the last day...[to involve] a distinctively priestly Messiah, 'an eschatological High Priest'."²⁷

Second, when the Pharisees object to Jesus and his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–8), Jesus identifies "himself with David and his disciples with *priests in the Temple*."²⁸ Pitre takes from this exchange, not only a rationale for Jesus to "work" on the Sabbath, but an allusion to his priesthood.²⁹ He relates Jesus' response to the way Leviticus 24:5–9, 1 Samuel 21:6, and the *War Scroll* (1QM 2.1–6) speak of priestly actions.

Finally, Pitre argues that Jesus' celebration of the Passover is another place where his priesthood is evident.³⁰ With Christ's reference to the new covenant (Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20) and his explicit command for his followers to continue the supper (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24–25), Pitre writes, "*Jesus deliberately institutes the repetition of a sacrificial rite of the Last Supper by the disciples, who would thereby act as eschatological priests*."³¹ Pitre recognizes that some may not immediately see this connection and therefore presses readers to consider that "the 'pouring out' of blood in a cultic context" is a priestly duty.³² All in all, Pitre's intertextual, historical, and exegetical work is persuasive, and invites further inquiry into the Gospels.

We intend to supplement these historical Jesus studies with a biblical-theological consideration of Matthew 8, paying careful attention

²³Pitre, "Jesus, the New Temple, and the New Priesthood."

²⁴*Ibid.*, 70–71.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 72–74.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 74–79.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 79–82.

³¹*Ibid.*, 79; emphasis his.

³²*Ibid.*, 79. As textual evidence, he cites in a footnote: Ex 29:12; Lev 4:7, 18, 25–26, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9; Deut 12:25–27; 2 Kgs 16:15.

to intertextual connections that accentuate the associations between Christ and the Old Testament office of the priesthood. In this vein, Matthew 8:1–4 becomes an important test case, as we relate the healing of a leper to the priestly responsibility in Leviticus 13–15 to adjudicate the cleanliness of leprosy among the covenant people. The use of Isaiah 53:4 in the near context contributes as well to the demonstration of Jesus’ *munus sacerdotal* in Matthew.

III. THE MATTHEAN JESUS AS PRIEST

Immediately following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 8 begins with the account of Jesus healing a leper (vv. 1–4). The location in the narrative is important. Not only is it the first application of Jesus’ own teaching “blessed are the merciful” (5:7), but it is also his first miracle, making it paradigmatic in many ways. In all, the episode challenges the authority of the temple cultus in Jerusalem, and established Jesus’ own priestly prerogative.³³ A comparison between Matthew 8:1–4 and Leviticus 13–14 reveals this.

1. The Event of the Leper’s Healing

In the Matthean passage, Jesus heals a leper and tells him to present himself to the priest with the appropriate gift. This evokes Leviticus 13:1–14:32 that instructs possible lepers to present themselves to a priest (cf., esp. 13:1–2). The priest then examines the possible leper (13:3–8) and pronounces him/her either clean or unclean (vv. 3, 8). These same instructions are repeated throughout Leviticus 13: *a priest* is to *examine* lepers and *make pronouncement* over them. Leviticus 14:1–32 then orders ritual offerings to be made if they should be found “unclean.”³⁴ Priests can do this because of their connection with the tabernacle/temple, the epicenter of holiness in the fallen world. With such in view, the reader notices in Matthew 8:2–4 some startling actions and words from the one who himself is not formally a priest and just said he has no intention “to abolish the law and the prophets” (Matt 5:17). What right does Jesus

³³While this interpretation is commonly overlooked, it is not without precedent: Walter Grundmann contends that Matthew 8:1–4 identifies Jesus as the new cultic locus (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968], 248). I (Nicholas) explore this concept in more detail and from various methodological angles in the third chapter of *Matthew’s New David at the End of Exile: A Socio-Rhetorical Study of Scriptural Quotations*, NovTSup, (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

³⁴Not only is ceremonial purity in view (cf., T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed., [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012], 237–48), but also “at stake is membership in the residence community itself” (Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, OTL, trans., Douglas W. Stott [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 168).

therefore have to make/declare the leper clean in 8:3?³⁵ He is not a descendent of Levi and acts entirely independently of the priesthood.

To start, it is clear that Jesus understands the implications of what he is doing in so far as he references Leviticus 14:1–32, telling the former leper to take to the priest the gift Moses commanded (8:4). But in 8:3 Jesus is himself acting as a priest would be expected to: he is making the examination (implied) and *giving the pronouncement*. While the direction to show himself to the priest in 8:4 could mean that he must go and receive the proper examination, there is clearly no need any longer. He is already healed. The examination and pronouncement have already been made. Instead, the injunction to show himself to the priest is a challenge to the current priesthood.

The former leper is to show the priests that he has been healed *independently of them*. Thus, he goes to them not to be examined and classified, but “as a witness to them.” That is, he is to go as a *prophetic witness*, not a patient. He is to testify to what has happened and to the one who has made and pronounced him clean.³⁶ The indication, therefore, is that a new priest(hood) has arrived, summed up in Jesus himself.

Equally, Jesus is the new epicenter of holiness, the new temple. The evangelist’s description of the leper’s approach—he comes and prostrates himself before Jesus (v. 2; προσελθὼν προσεκύνει αὐτῷ)—supports this “new priest/temple” reading of Matthew 8:2–4.³⁷ In the LXX the combination of ἔρχομαι and προσκυνεῖν is typical of worshippers approaching the tabernacle or temple.³⁸ Jesus is thus identified not only as the priest who declares clean, but also the temple itself—the place from which holiness/cleanliness emanates.

These considerations together demonstrate the qualitative difference between the sons of Levi and the Son of God. Just as the Law instructed

³⁵C. H. Cave suggests that the leper’s request, ἐὰν θέλῃς δύνασαι με καθαρίσαι (Mk 1:40/Matt 8:2), is an application to be only *declared* clean (“The Leper: Mark 1. 40–45,” *New Testament Studies* 25 [1978–1979]: 246). The full healing, then, is more than expected. The touch and the imperative καθαρίσθητι together form a speech-act in which the leper is *rendered and declared* clean.

³⁶So the pronoun αὐτοῖς is read as a dative *incommodi*: “Show yourself to the priest . . . in order to be (εἰς) a witness/testimony *against* them (αὐτοῖς).” This is how the phrase εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς is clearly taken in Mark 6:11, and Daniel B. Wallace suggests the same for Mark 13:9 (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 142–44; cf., also Matt 10:18).

³⁷This is the same approach as the magi in 2:2, 8, 11 where a slightly different effect is created: there Jesus is not the new priest *but the object of worship!* After considering the use of προσέρχεσθαι in the LXX and Hellenistic literature, James R. Edwards concludes that the verb has “unmistakable cultic connotations . . . now transferred to Jesus” (“The Use of ΠΡΟΣΕΡΧΕΣΘΑΙ in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 [1987]: 65–74; quote from p. 65).

³⁸Johannes Schneider, “ἔρχομαι,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2:667. Given that this leper is the first in the narrative since the magi to so “come” (2:2, 11), this passage also reminds the reader that *Matthew 2:4 contained the last reference to priests before this episode*. The use of κύριε in 8:2 also serves to focus the image all the more (Edwards, “Use of ΠΡΟΣΕΡΧΕΣΘΑΙ,” 67).

priests to judge lepers, declaring them “clean” or “unclean”, so Matthew 8 presents Jesus not only adjudicating the leprosy case, but actually healing the leper. Jesus’ priestly speech is therefore *performative*, something that was fitting for his divine character and priestly office at one and the same time.³⁹ In all, Jesus obeys the old covenant law, while simultaneously demonstrating the new creation power of his greater priestly mediation.⁴⁰ Under the old covenant priests shielded themselves from impurity, but now Christ comes with a “contagious purity,” such that by his physical touch he is able to purify a man and restore him to the worshipping community.⁴¹

2. An Explanation of the Leper’s Healing

After two more healing narrations (8:5–15) and a general statement on the power of Jesus’ mere words (8:16), Matthew interprets Jesus’ therapeutic activities in 8:17 with a fulfillment-quotation of Isaiah 53:4. Two observations will help us understand the placement of this quotation. First, Jesus excels at making distinctions, an essential quality for priestly service.⁴² He not only removes unclean people from the presence of God, as in his temple cleansing,⁴³ he also demonstrates his power over “unclean spirits” (cf., esp. Matt 10:1). One of the recurring themes in Matthew and the other Gospels is the way Jesus exorcises demons. For example, Matthew 4:24 introduces Jesus’ ministry by saying, “His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.”⁴⁴ Likewise throughout

³⁹Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 45, 51.

⁴⁰The greater power of Christ’s priesthood may be seen in the shift between the Law of Moses in Leviticus 21:10–12 and the eschatological hope of a new priesthood in Ezekiel 42:14; 44:19. In the former, the priests were forbidden to approach death, for fear of polluting God’s temple. But in the latter, the priests were warned to remove their garments for fear of communicating holiness to those outside the temple precincts. When Christ came, he consecrated men and women for worship by healing them. In his day, Christ was not legally qualified to be a priest because he was from the tribe of Judah (cf., Heb 7:14). But in sanctifying these men and women for worship, it is evident that he functioned as a priest. In time, Jesus’ priestly authority would be the means by which he would purify God’s macro-temple, and bring shalom to heaven and earth.

⁴¹Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 66–71.

⁴²Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 114.

⁴³Make no mistake, the primary emphasis of Jesus’ priestly ministry in the NT is his role as covenantal advocate (1 Jn 2:1–2). He is the appointed priest to make the final sacrifice and to intercede for his own (Rom 8:32–34). This is the overarching message of Hebrews. Nevertheless, as a priestly prophet like Jeremiah, Jesus comes denouncing the leaders of Israel, bringing judgment on God’s house, and cleansing the temple. This adversarial role must not be neglected, if one is to understand his comprehensive ministry.

⁴⁴Incidentally, 8:16 forms an inclusio with 4:23 (Ulrich Luz, *Matthew*, trans., James E. Crouch; 3 vols., Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001–2007], 2:13). Both passages summarize Jesus’ healing ministry, using forms of *θεραπεύω* and *νόσος*.

Matthew, as Jesus heals people (8:28–34; 9:1–8, 18–26, 27–31, 32–34), he cleanses them from “*unclean spirits*” (cf. 10:1; 12:43–45). While the stress on *unclean* spirits is more prominent in Mark’s Gospel (1:23, 26–27; 3:11; 5:2, 8, 13),⁴⁵ it should not be overlooked in Matthew’s. If we take a step back to situate our passage within the temple cosmology that informs the whole Bible, then Jesus’ healing ministry is more than an act of compassion; it is priestly. In delivering creation from the evil one and destroying the works of the devil (cf., 1 Jn 3:8),⁴⁶ he is proving to be an Israelite worthy of the priesthood.

Second, Matthew unites Jesus’ healing work to the sacrificial passage in Isaiah 53. When Matthew uses the quotation, he alerts readers to the fact that Christ’s healing is intimately associated with his role as the Servant and priest.⁴⁷ He is presenting what the kingdom of God will be like, a place where sin, Satan, and corruption have been replaced by righteousness, Christ, and life (cf., Isa 27:1ff.). In his earthly ministry, which adumbrates his coming kingdom, Jesus functions as a priest who heals his people and cleanses the cosmos from all its unclean elements.

Altogether, Jesus’ ministry of healing, which Matthew finds fulfilling Isaiah 53, gives strong support for seeing Christ as a priest. Jesus, who is the eschatological fulfillment of Isaiah 53, comes to super-fulfill these priestly actions. And so like the “many” statements of Matthew 20:28 (“even as the Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for *many*”) and Matthew 26:28 (“this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for *many* for the forgiveness of sins”)—which also take their verbal cue from Isaiah 53 (“he bore the sin for *many*,” v. 12)—Matthew 8’s explicit citation of Isaiah 53 announces that the eschatological Servant-Priest has drawn near.⁴⁸

Further exploration would be fruitful along this axis when considering the temple and priestly themes in Matthew 2:1–12 (considered briefly above in notes 37 and 38), *the uniquely Matthean* *logon tou iepou meizōn estin ōde* in 12:6, and of course the last supper in 26:26–28 where Matthew *alone among the Synoptics* includes Jesus’ explicit statement that the cup is *εις ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*. All of these passages have strong priestly overtones with the potential to fill out and develop the emphases in Matthew 8.

⁴⁵Commenting on the Gospels’ use of “unclean spirits,” Perrin offers a convincing argument for tracing this term back to Zechariah 13:2 (*Jesus the Temple*, 159–63). He argues Jesus’ power struggle with the demons reflects his eschatological priesthood, one which adumbrates his exalted status as a warrior-priest like Melchizedek.

⁴⁶G. K. Beale, *The Temple and Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 46–79.

⁴⁷On the tight relationship between the Servant and priest, see F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Develop of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 112.

⁴⁸See e.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 512–13; Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 308.

Still, without exploring these other texts at the moment, it is our contention that Matthew 8:1–4, read within its canonical context with Leviticus 13–14, and the literary context of Matthew’s citation of Isaiah 53:5 in 8:17, provide sufficient evidence to conclude that Matthew is presenting Jesus as Israel’s new eschatological priest. In turn, this leads us to consider some of the theological upshot of these observations.

IV. BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Four biblical-theological themes come to the surface as we consider Christ as priest in Matthew’s Gospel. First, in his preaching (e.g., Matt 5–7), Jesus carries out a vital aspect of the priestly ministry (cf., Lev 10:11). Whereas Malachi 2:1–9 rebuked the sons of Aaron for their failure to teach; Jesus is commended by Matthew as having uncommon authority in his teaching (Matt 7:29).

Second, in his new covenant pronouncement, Jesus promises “forgiveness for sins” (26:28). In this statement, Jesus identifies not only the ultimate promise of the new covenant (see Jer 31:34), but coming from his lips, it identifies him as the priest who inaugurates the new covenant.

Third, while there is no place in the Old Testament which speaks of the priests healing, Ezekiel 44 does contain a vision of the coming temple with a restored priesthood. In that chapter, verse 19 speaks of priests “transmit[ing] holiness to the people with their garments.” In contrast to the instructions of Leviticus 21 which demand priests to avoid death and disease by which they can be defiled, Ezekiel 44 suggests that the priest’s garments have the power to communicate holiness to others.⁴⁹

What makes this verse important is the background it supplies to the idea of healing and cleanliness. While Levitical priests are not given power to heal under the old covenant, there is the hint that something life-giving might transpire in the new covenant. After all, the context of Ezekiel 40–47 is eschatological and dependent on the institution of the new covenant. Consequently, on the basis of Ezekiel 44:19, we should be open to seeing the act of divine healing as a priestly work.

Fourth, Sinclair Ferguson rightly describes Jesus’ healing in royal, military terms.⁵⁰ But if Jesus’ healing is only kingdom warfare, it ignores the fact that Jesus as a priest exorcises *unclean* spirits. Thus, his healing

⁴⁹For discussion of Christ’s “contagious holiness,” see Fletcher-Louis, “Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 2,” 64–71. He surveys the scholarly opinion and concludes with Chilton that a scholarly consensus is emerging which understands the impure as “contracting holiness” through physical contact with Jesus (*Jesus’ Baptism and Jesus’ Healing*, 58–97). Perrin observes that the magical exorcisms of Jesus’ day are replaced by Jesus’ spoken word (*Jesus the Temple*, 169). Either way (by physical contact or verbal command), this turns the law on its head, and rightly so.

⁵⁰Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Contours in Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 50.

miracles prefigure his eschatological regal authority *and* his priestly power to make all things new (read: clean). Additionally, it is important to remember that the Spirit's work never happens apart from Christ.⁵¹ New creation, like the first creation, is spoken by the Word of God (Jn 1:1–5; 2 Cor 4:6) and effected by the Spirit. This kind of regeneration is described in salvific terms later in the New Testament (e.g., Titus 3:5), but in the Gospels the power of Christ's new creation is most clearly seen in his healing miracles—miracles that are intimately related to his priestly role. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Matthew 8.

V. CONCLUSION

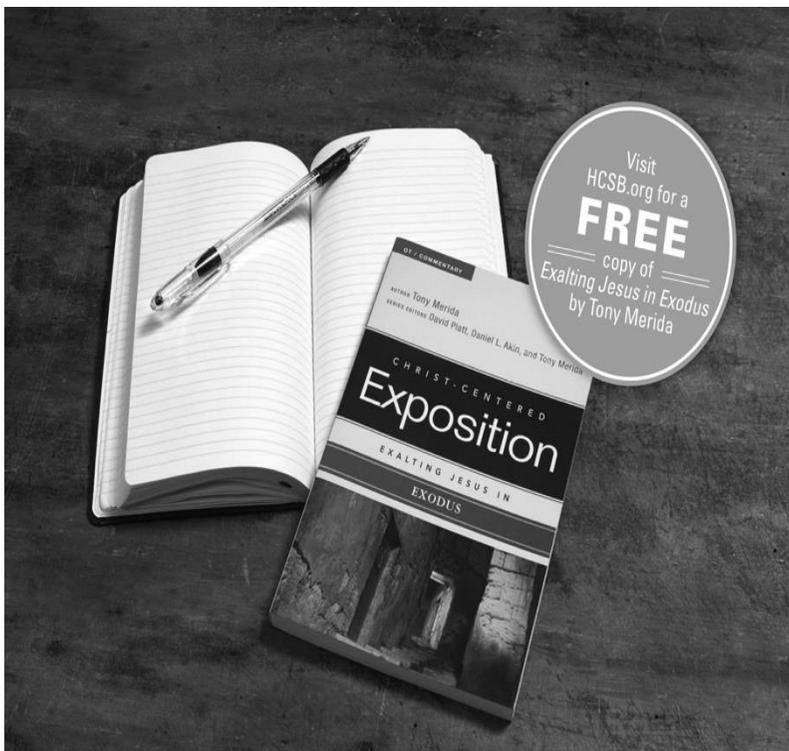
In truth, because Jesus is born under the Law of Moses (Gal 4:4) he has no legal right to claim the priesthood for himself. And as an obedient son, he does not grasp for the priesthood. For Jesus, covenantal obedience means affirming the priesthood of the Levites (cf., Matt 23:2), even as his own righteous life would ultimately prove to be more fit than that of the Levites. Thus, what Hebrews argues the Gospels anticipate: Jesus is a new *kind* of priest, one that has come to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17) and inaugurate a new and better covenant.

Therefore, in Matthew 8 Jesus sends the leper to the priests as the Law commands. However, by healing him first, he shrewdly but innocently announces—for those with eyes to see—the messianic priest, the Son of Man who has come into the world to forgive sins once and for all.⁵²

In conclusion, it is our conviction that Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth as a priest who will make you clean. In his earthly life, he displayed his priestly authority in healing a leper. In the age to come, he will cleanse all his covenant people by putting away their sins and bringing them alive into the presence of God. This priestly work is typically associated with the theology of Hebrews, and rightly so. It is our contention, however, that Matthew understands the Son of Man to be priestly in his earthly humiliation as well. Such a vision of Christ opens wide our eyes to what the Evangelists are doing as it improves our hermeneutical approach to the Gospels and adjusts our prophet-and-kingdom heavy Christologies. Without diminishing the identity of Jesus Christ as a prophet and king, it should be increasingly apparent that the Jesus of the Gospels is also a priest.

⁵¹Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 76–78, 199–202.

⁵²Marcus, “Son of Man as Son of Adam, Part II,” 371–74.



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