

“WHO IS THE GREATEST?”

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The question, “Who is the greatest?” is posed in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 18:1–4; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46–48; 22:24–30),¹ and readers of the “triple tradition” come away with the definite impression that this query was a matter of some moment for the disciples of Jesus.² While it is possible to attribute their in-house wrangling to the foibles of human nature and then dismiss it simply as the beginning of ministerial jealousy, the issue for Jesus is much weightier. In a nutshell, his followers must be willing to die to themselves for the sake of being his servants. In Matthew’s account, the issue is no less than this: if they continue to quarrel about “Who is the greatest?” they will forego their place in the eschatological kingdom. The lion’s share of attention will be devoted to Matt 18:1–4 just because of this startling proposition, unique to Matthew, that even the circle of Jesus’ followers will “never enter the kingdom of heaven” unless they turn and humble themselves after the model of a child. Thereafter, we will look at the parallels in Mark and Luke and then take some account of additional incidents in which the disciples continue to debate their comparative status in the kingdom.³

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¹ The parallels are conveniently placed in columns by Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (AB 27a; New York: Doubleday, 2009) 678–79.

² Discipleship in the Gospels is well-worn territory, but especially valuable is John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Volume 3: *Companions and Competitors* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 40–285. On the disciples in Matthew, see Donald Senior, *What are They Saying About Matthew* (2d ed.; New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 91–95; Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 115–64; and especially Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew’s Gospel* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). The precise identity of the disciples in Matt 18:1 and parallels is a subject of debate. They are either the Twelve or all the followers without distinction. The former is argued, for example, by E. R. Martinez, “The Interpretation of οἱ μαθηταὶ in Matthew 18,” *CBQ* 23 (1961) 281–92; Georg Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie des Matthäus* (3d ed.; FRLANT 82; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 191–92, while the latter is favored, among others, by Wilkins, *Discipleship* 167; William G. Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Community: Mt. 17, 22–18, 35* (AnBib 44; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970) 71–72, 83–84. For our purposes, the resolution of the question is not vital for understanding the impact of the present text, though it should be noted that Mark 9:35 and Luke 22:30 do specify the Twelve. More important is Wilkins’s contention that Matthew portrays the disciples as they really were, negative and positive, so that they can be an example of what the church should be (*Discipleship* 169). See also Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983) 47–48.

³ On redactional matters pertaining to the several passages, I must defer to the commentaries and the various specialized studies. As regards the literary and structural exegesis of the Gospel “child” sayings, there is *Semeia 29: Kingdom and Children* (ed. Daniel Patte, 1983).

I. MATTHEW 18:1–4

1. *The setting.* The First Gospel has aptly been called “the way of righteousness.”⁴ As is commonly known, the teaching of Jesus in Matthew is structured in terms of five major discourses: chapters 5–7 (the Sermon on the Mount); chapter 10 (the mission discourse); chapter 13 (the parables of the kingdom); chapter 18 (instructions for the believing community); and chapters 23–25 (the woes against the scribes and Pharisees and the expectation of the end-time). As Stanton further notes, by giving such prominence to the five discourses, the evangelist stresses the continuing importance of Jesus’ instruction for his own day. The point is made explicitly in the final verses of the Gospel (28:19–20), where the disciples are commissioned by the risen Lord to teach all the nations everything he has commanded them. Consequently, “for Matthew’s readers (or listeners) the teaching of Jesus lies at the heart of their missionary proclamation.”⁵ Of course, the discourses of the First Gospel are not isolated literary units, but assume their place within Matthew’s metanarrative.⁶ It is in this overall design of things that Jesus, from chapter 16 onward, is depicted as the one who must suffer, die, and then rise again. In common with the other Synoptics (in contrast to John), Matthew organizes Jesus’ ministry in terms of a main period in Galilee and environs and a last week in Jerusalem, with a lengthy journey section in between. But like John, the Synoptics, by means of a “theological geography,” make Galilee the place of revelation and response and Jerusalem the locale of rejection and death.⁷ Matthew’s travel narrative is practically the same as the “way” motif in Mark and Luke.

His story, even more explicitly than Mark’s, is that of a Galilean Messiah, whose mission, despite its initial success in his own province, makes no impression on the entrenched opposition of the Jerusalem authorities. It is only when Jerusalem has been condemned and abandoned that the mission can go ahead—from the hills of Galilee, the place where Isaiah had said the light must shine.⁸

Immediately preceding chapter 18, chapter 17 presages his resurrection by means of the Transfiguration (vv. 1–9) and then reiterates the themes of cross and resurrection: “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands

⁴ As per Strecker’s *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit*; idem, *Theology of the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 364–91; Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford Bible Series; 2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 58–78; Donald A. Hagner, “Holiness and Ecclesiology: The Church in Matthew,” in *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 170–86; Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 429–63.

⁵ Stanton, *Gospels and Jesus* 59.

⁶ On the structure of Matthew, a bit dated, though still quite relevant is the survey by Marianne Meye Thompson, “The Structure of Matthew: A Survey of Recent Trends,” in *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 12 (1982) 195–238. More recent is Senior, *Matthew* 21–37. The immediate context of 18:1–4 is set by Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice* 13–25.

⁷ R. T. France, “Matthew and Jerusalem,” in *Built Upon the Rock* 110.

⁸ *Ibid.* 113.

of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day” (vv. 22b–23a).⁹ In point of fact, the Transfiguration directly foreshadows the crucifixion, as demonstrated by Dale Allison’s study.¹⁰ Warren Carter in particular discerns that the audience comes to realize that Jesus’ death and resurrection are linked to discipleship: “His death provides the paradigm for their existence in the time until the Son of Man returns.”¹¹ The relevance of this datum for 18:1–4 should be fairly obvious. The infighting among the disciples, stemming from their impulses to be the “greatest,” is directly at odds with the self-sacrificing servanthood of their Lord.¹²

Matthew 18 itself, as Petri Luomanen remarks, opens a window onto the everyday life of Matthew’s congregation, a group emerging as a distinctive entity from the surrounding world.¹³ The uniqueness of this newly founded community is underscored by the way in which Matthew builds up to chapter 18. Jesus chooses the twelve apostles (chap. 10) and then communicates to them in parables, by means of which they are set off from the crowds (chap. 13, esp. vv. 10–17). Thereafter, Peter’s confession of 16:13–16, followed by Jesus’ promise to build his church on this “rock” (16:17–19), and his urging of the disciples to take up their cross for his sake (16:21–28), all foreshadow the formation of an independent Christian congregation. The subjects addressed in the chapter are: the matter of who is the greatest (vv. 1–4); the reception of Jesus’ “little ones” and the dire consequences of causing one of them to stumble (vv. 5–6); a pronouncement of woe against temptations to sin and yielding to temptation (vv. 7–9);¹⁴ a warning not to despise one of these “little ones” (vv. 10–14); instructions about dealing with an offending brother (vv. 15–20); the necessity of forgiveness (vv. 21–35). In his study of *Matthew’s Emmanuel*, David Kupp insightfully adds another dimension to chapter 18. In its various ramifications, the chapter bespeaks Jesus’ presence in the community. In a nutshell, “The purpose, orientation and authority of this community are found in the name of Jesus; his persona of the divine presence delimits and defines the parameters of its every act of assembly, and excludes those who would gather for a contrary purpose and under another authority.”¹⁵

⁹ See further, Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice* 28–39.

¹⁰ Dale C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 226–32.

¹¹ Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (2d ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 148. See also Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 101–4.

¹² David L. Turner calls attention to the intense irony that the disciples are preoccupied with their greatness so soon after the instruction of 16:21–28, concerning Jesus’ destiny and theirs (*Matthew* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008] 435).

¹³ Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom: A Study on the Structure of Matthew’s View of Salvation* (WUNT 2/101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 231.

¹⁴ Commenting on the parallel in Mark 9:42, Christopher D. Marshall explains that “scandalizing” one of these little ones signifies more than causing them to sin; it means making them abandon their faith-commitment to Jesus and thus fail to attain to final salvation (*Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative* [SNTSMS 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989] 159).

¹⁵ David D. Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God’s People in the First Gospel* (SNTSMS 90; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 88.

One is tempted, in company with Ulrich Luz, to think that Matthew, in chapter 18, is not interested in clear divisions and leaves few clues concerning the logical sequences of these subsections.¹⁶ On the other hand, Robert Gundry discerns that there are subtopical shifts in the chapter, but with the subtopics exhibiting a melding process whereby one flows into another almost imperceptibly.¹⁷ For this reason, I would suggest that even with the diversity evident in this chapter, there is also a decided element of unity. That is to say, most of the teaching can be subsumed under the rubric of humility: humility with regard to one's own place in the kingdom, receiving rather than despising Jesus' little ones, administering and accepting correction, and willingness to forgive others. R. T. France constructively terms chapter 18 "Living Together: The Discourse on Relationships." France observes that the theme of the discourse is not so much individual discipleship as the corporate life of those who are joined by their common commitment as disciples, with special attention devoted to "the strains and tensions to which such a life is exposed through self-concern and lack of care for fellow disciples, through bad examples and errant behavior, and through an unwillingness to forgive as we have been forgiven."¹⁸ Such a common life, he continues, inevitably creates tensions, and the question of 18:1 expresses the sort of rivalry and self-interest that would occur naturally in any such group.¹⁹ Humility, then, is essential if the community of the eschatological kingdom is going to "work;" it must be patterned after the king himself, who is "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29). Robert Brown writes that humility in the NT is both a "personal virtue" and a "social virtue." As for the former, it emphasizes both a sense of dependence on God and a spirit of contrition in his presence (cf. Isa 57:15). In the latter sense, what comes to the fore is the life of humble service to the needy, patterned on the self-emptying of Christ and his distinctive style of life.²⁰ Carter stresses the "social virtue" aspect: community relationships as marked by humility, mutual consideration, and forgiveness are foremost in Matthew 18.²¹ This stands to reason, given that Jesus' death and resurrection are determinative of discipleship. His acceptance of humiliation and death provides the paradigm for his followers until he returns.²²

2. *The question (18:1).* Matthew relates that the disciples approach Jesus "in that hour."²³ "That hour" relates to the previous paragraph of 17:24–27,

¹⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 422, 424.

¹⁷ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 358. Dominique Hermant, "Structure Littéraire du 'Discours communautaire' de Matthieu 18," *RB* 103 (1996) 76–90, discerns in Matthew 18 a specific literary technique consisting of an assemblage of "elementary unities" into six "periods" by means of repetition, inclusion, and link-words.

¹⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 672.

¹⁹ France, *Matthew* 673 (see further *ibid.* 674–75).

²⁰ Robert N. Brown, "Jesus and the Child as Model of Spirituality," *IBS* 4 (1982) 181.

²¹ Carter, *Matthew* 148.

²² On Jesus as the model for the disciples, there is the brief but helpful discussion of Strecker, including the factor of the cross (*Theology of New Testament* 387–88).

²³ Ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ and related expressions are catalogued by Thompson, *Matthew's Advice* 70–71.

which narrates the incident of the temple tax. The conversation between Jesus and Peter regarding the tax requires some unpacking. The collectors of the half-shekel “dues” (τὰ διδραχμα) inquire rather critically, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” Peter answers in the affirmative, whereupon Jesus puts the question to Peter, “From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or others?” When Peter replies, “from others,” Jesus infers that “the sons are free” (i.e. exempt from tolls and tributes). There would appear to be a twofold point here. The one is that the “sons” are really not obligated to pay the temple tax, simply because God is the actual owner of the sanctuary, and *he* does not impose this obligation on his own children. Yet in order to prevent unnecessary offense, Peter is directed to pay the tax.²⁴ The other, as stated above, is the emergence of a group distinct from the contemporary world.²⁵ That Jesus equates the half-shekel payment imposed by the Jewish leadership with taxes demanded by “the kings of the earth” implies strongly that the temple state in Jerusalem is identifiable with Rome and other world empires.²⁶ As over against these embodiments of “worldly power,” Jesus’ assembly is composed of different kinds of “sons,” those who embrace the vision of God’s reign as proclaimed by him.²⁷ Thus, the irony of the situation is that these particular “sons” are now entangled in an essentially worldly contest, to determine who is the best and most powerful among their fellow believers.

It is as the sequel to 17:24–27 that the inferential “then” (ἄρα) of 18:1 makes sense. As Gundry explains, “then” indicates that the disciples have understood Jesus’ foregoing words about their being sons of a king, and now they want to know the implication of that for their standing in the kingdom.²⁸

²⁴ On the tax and Jesus’ motivations in paying it, see the detailed paper of David E. Garland, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Temple Tax,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers* (SBL Seminar Papers 26; ed. Kent Harold Richards; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 190–209. Garland’s argument that the temple tax is in view is historically more satisfying than Warren Carter’s reconstruction that refers τὰ διδραχμα to the post-70 Roman toll imposed on the Jews by Vespasian (*Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001] 130–44). In agreement with Garland are W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–1997) 2.739–41.

²⁵ See further, John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 726–27. For Matthew, writes Nolland, “only the Christian Jews carry forward the destiny of Israel” (ibid. 727).

²⁶ The idea of Israel as reckoned among pagan powers is traced by N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 477–539, esp. 506–7.

²⁷ Jonathan T. Pennington calls attention to the fact that in 18:1–5 the topic flows from 17:24–27 into the question about status in the kingdom, with “kingdom of heaven” repeated three times in 18:1, 3, 4. This makes for a genuine contrast between the “kings of the earth” (an allusion to Ps 2:2) and the “sons of the kingdom.” “In 17:25 the sons of the kings of the earth are in view, while in 18:1–5 children serve as the model for the very different kingdom of heaven” (*Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009] 319).

²⁸ France plausibly suggests that the greatness question may have special reference to Peter, who is particularly in the limelight in Matthew. In 17:24–27, it is Peter who speaks for Jesus, and Jesus’ solution to the “tax problem” included Peter to the apparent exclusion of the rest (*Matthew* 676).

“After all, a monarchy presupposes hierarchy rather than equality.”²⁹ It is for this reason they press the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”³⁰ As voiced in Matt 20:21 (= Mark 10:37) by the mother of James and John, “Who is the greatest?” comes down to a matter of which disciples will sit at Jesus’ right and left hand in his kingdom. The customary inquiry is whether the present or future manifestation of Jesus’ rule is in view. But in the case of followers so bent on securing places of prominence for themselves, any sharp distinction between the two phases of his reign is an artificial dichotomy: “Do not the disciples assume that any hierarchy in the future kingdom will be reflected in some way in the structure of the church and that greatness in the kingdom means greatness even now?”³¹

3. *The object lesson (18:2).* The direct answer to the disciples’ question is delayed until verse 4. But in order to prepare the ground for that reply, Jesus summons a child and places him or her in the midst of the group to serve as a “visual aid.” Gundry points out that Matthew draws on a verb (*προσκαλέω*) that brings to mind the calling of disciples themselves, because “from the very beginning the child stands for a disciple and Matthew’s word clearly indicates the summoning of the disciples in 10:1; 15:32; 20:25. . . .”³² How precisely a child can serve as a role model for Jesus’ followers is a matter of long-standing debate, even with the hint provided by verse 4 that child-likeness involves humbling oneself. Luz tellingly observes that for the most part interpreters ask not what children *are* like; rather, they ask what children *should* be. More often than not, he continues, they have read the text as if it said, “Become like good, well-behaved children.”³³ After a sketch of the history of interpretation, which exposes some rather idealized portraits of childhood, Luz wisely comments that this history shows “how easily the interpretations are conditioned by the interpreters’ images of children and especially how often they read into our text patriarchal ideals about raising children without being aware of what they are doing.” “Like children,” remarks Luz, “has been regarded as an empty space that the exegetes have been only too willing to fill in terms of their own relationship to children.”³⁴

The meaning of the child metaphor emerges from the social climate of the ancient world. Luz again is helpful. He explains that in antiquity children found themselves in a negative social situation. They were not considered to be full persons with their own integrity, but rather they were incomplete beings who needed training; they were “babes” (*νήπιοι*). It is much to the point

²⁹ Gundry, *Matthew* 359. It may be, as France proposes, that the issue of greatness is all the more urgent as Jesus has made it clear that he is going to die (*ibid.* 675). In other words, Who would take his place? This question is actually posed by *Gos. Thom.* 12: “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you will go away from us; who is it that will then be great over us?’”

³⁰ The adverb *μείζων* is comparative in form, but, as is often the case, the comparative does duty for the superlative (BDF §§60–61).

³¹ Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 2.756.

³² Gundry, *Matthew* 360.

³³ Luz, *Matthew* 8–20 427. Luz’s criticism also pertains to Dan O. Via’s psychological approach, *The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel in the Middle of Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 128–33.

³⁴ Luz, *Matthew* 8–20 428.

that words for “child” (παῖς and παιδίον) can be synonymous with “slave” (δοῦλος). This datum says a great deal about the legal standing of children, who were subject to the unlimited authority of their fathers (cf. Gal 4:1–2).³⁵ In plain language, children and slaves were alike in that both had to do what they were told. This is the point of comparison with the disciples. Instead of making “grown-up” demands and insisting on positions of supremacy, they must turn and become as the child placed in their presence: they must embrace powerlessness and a low profile and be willing to act at the behest of another as the conditions of being Jesus’ disciples and of entering the (eschatological) kingdom itself. Craig Keener is right: “Jesus is modeled best among the most powerless, not among the powerful.”³⁶ So is Donald Hagner: “Jesus here reverses the perspective of the world by his statement of a fundamental paradox: greatness in the kingdom is a matter of humility, not power or position.”³⁷

But we can take matters a step further. In the biblical world, “child” and “servant” overlap in a theologically significant manner, as the volume by Walther Zimmerli and Joachim Jeremias has amply demonstrated.³⁸ According to their data, the Hebrew for “servant” (עֶבֶד) occurs 807 times in the MT. Among a half dozen or so words, most frequently the LXX chose as the Greek equivalents παῖς, παιδίον, παιδάριον (340 times), and δοῦλος (327 times).³⁹ Where theology (Christology) enters the picture is the “Servant of God” passages in the latter chapters of Isaiah. The LXX predominantly renders עֶבֶד יְהוָה with παῖς, though δοῦλος appears three times. In Hellenistic Jewish literature subsequent to the LXX, the servant is consistently termed παῖς. As a result of its ambiguity, παῖς θεοῦ could be understood either as “servant of God” or “child of God.”⁴⁰ It is not surprising, then, that the NT picks up on this nomenclature and applies both “Son of God” and “Servant of God” to Jesus (as messianic titles).⁴¹ To be sure, caution has to be exercised in linking Matt 18:2 with the “Servant” passages of Isaiah. But the present context, which devotes so much attention to Jesus’ rejection and death as the righteous sufferer, should be allowed a say. The reference may be oblique, but in demanding that the disciples become as *a* child, the reader of this Gospel should probably understand that in the background is *the* Child or Servant of the Lord, whom they are to emulate. If this identification is correct, then there is all the more reason for the disciples to stop demanding the high

³⁵ Ibid. Likewise, Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 2.757. On the social standing of children in antiquity, see Albrecht Oepke, *TDNT* 5.639–52; Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” in *The Child in Christian Thought* (ed. Marcia J. Bunge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 31–36 (with extensive bibliography).

³⁶ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 449.

³⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33b; Dallas: Word, 1995) 518. See also Luz, *Matthew* 8–20 429–30.

³⁸ Walther Zimmerli and Joachim Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (2d ed.; SBT 20; London: SCM, 1965). Servanthood in the OT is surveyed quite helpfully by Richard Schultz, *NIDOTTE* 4.1183–98 (with full bibliography).

³⁹ Zimmerli/Jeremias, *Servant* 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 53.

⁴¹ Ibid. 80–106.

places in the kingdom and assume the role of the one who came not to be served but to serve.

4. *The condition for entering the Kingdom (18:3).* In this verse, as introduced by the Christologically significant “amen” (ἀμήν),⁴² becoming like children (τὰ παιδιά) is made the precondition of entrance into the kingdom. It is as though Jesus is saying, “never mind about being the greatest; just make sure you are in the kingdom at all.” Luomanen’s observation is perceptive. In Matthew’s story, the discussion about greatness has a much more fundamental character than in Mark’s: the disciples’ question concerns greatness in the kingdom, not only among the Twelve, as in Mark. Accordingly, says Luomanen, Jesus’ answer starts with the basics: he refers to the entrance requirements and on this basis draws the conclusion concerning greatness in the kingdom of heaven.⁴³ In contrast to Luomanen, however, “the basics” pertain to the eschatological kingdom. That Jesus’ sights are set on the future phase of the rule of God follows from other usages of the formula “enter the kingdom.” Already in 5:20 this expression has appeared: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The reference here is clearly eschatological. In 7:21; 19:23–24, the necessity of entering the kingdom likewise arises, and again the future dimension of the rule of God is in view.⁴⁴ However, in 23:13, the refusal of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom, pertains to the “already” of the kingdom. The question of entering the eschatological kingdom will be taken up below. For the moment, suffice it to say that even these immediate followers of Jesus are obliged to “turn” and imitate “the children.”

If the disciples would see the kingdom, they must “turn” (στρέφω). According to BDAG (948), the verb means to “experience an inward change,” “turn,” “change” (as paralleled by John 12:40 = Isa 6:9). Jeremias maintains that Matthew’s Greek is influenced by certain Aramaic verbs. When these verbs occur in conjunction with other verbs, they bear the sense of “again.” Thus, “turn and become as children” means “to become children again.”⁴⁵ Picking up on a suggestion of T. W. Manson, he proposes that “become a child again” is tantamount to “learn to say Abba again.” “This,” writes Jeremias, “brings us to the heart of the meaning of repentance. Repentance means learning to say Abba again, putting one’s whole trust in the heavenly Father, returning to the Father’s house and the Father’s arms” (citing the “Prodigal” of Luke 15:11–32).⁴⁶ But even if this analysis is linguistically accurate,⁴⁷ becoming

⁴² Don Garlington, *Exegetical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003) 140–41.

⁴³ Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom* 235.

⁴⁴ It follows that 19:23–24 is futuristic because of verses 28–30. As a matter of interest, according to Str-B (1.252–53), in certain rabbinic sources “to enter the kingdom” is “to enter (the rule of) the future aeon.”

⁴⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971) 155.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 156.

⁴⁷ Davies/Allison (*Matthew* 2.758) ask, “Did our evangelist recognize this idiom?” Matthew Black thinks that στρέφω in this verse is a “possible” auxiliary (and adverbial) occurrence (*An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* [3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967] 126).

a child again in the present setting should not to be understood in the sense of religious “conversion,” after the order of John 3:3–5, à la Jeremias and Davies/Allison.⁴⁸ Earlier portions of the Gospel have established that the disciples were called and made partners in Jesus’ ministry (10:1–4; 15:32; cf. 20:25). According to 13:10–17, the Twelve were privileged to see and hear things that others were not. Likewise, Peter, speaking for himself and the others, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God (16:15–18). That chapter 18 as a whole concerns itself with “Living Together: The Discourse on Relationships” (R. T. France’s heading) is an additional indicator that these disciples had already entered the kingdom in one very meaningful regard: they are now part and parcel of a new community. But if so, how is it that they must “turn?”

I would propose that the key is provided by στρέφω and cognates as the equivalent of שׁוּב, which in the prophets and the Deuteronomistic history signifies Israel’s turning from idolatry back to the covenant and its God.⁴⁹ Drawing on observations of Ernst Würtwwein, Robert Webb explains that repentance in the OT exhibits two broad strands of thought.⁵⁰ The one that concerns us is the employment of שׁוּב to give voice to the idea of “returning” or “going back.” This is “repentance” in the sense of “a reorientation of all spheres of a person’s life to a new relationship with Yahweh.”⁵¹ Then Webb states that this form of repentance had a “*covenantal orientation*: it was a radical return to Yahweh restoring covenantal loyalty” (Isa 10:20–21; Jer 3:22–23; 18:8; 26:3–5; 34:15; Zech 1:3–4; Mal 3:7). The people are called to turn from evil and return to God in obedience and trust. Sometimes it is Yahweh who gives the impulse to such radical returning (e.g. Jer 31:18–19; Lam 5:21). Moreover, repentance is not only a human turning; God must accept those who return and complete the transformation of the person by providing a new heart (e.g. Jer 24:7; 31:33–34; Ezek 36:22–29).⁵² Luomanen, then, is right that “Matthew picked a word [στρέφω] that hints at repentance but not at first conversion.” The wording may also anticipate the following parable of the lost sheep (vv. 10–14): straying disciples are called to turn back.⁵³

⁴⁸ Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 2.758. The “conversion” interpretation is sufficiently answered by Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Grossein im Gottesreich: Zu Mt 18,1–5,” in *Studien zum Matthäusevangelium: Festschrift für Wilhelm Pesch* (ed. Ludger Schenke; SBS; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988) 277–78. Schnackenburg advances five reasons why this sense is wrongheaded.

⁴⁹ See Johannes Behm, *TDNT* 7.716 (στρέφω), 719–20 (ἀποστρέφω), 723–25 (ἐπιστρέφω). On שׁוּב, there are J. A. Thompson and Elmer Martens, *NIDOTTE* 4.55–59; M. Graupner and H.-J. Fabry, *TDOT* 14.461–522 (with extensive bibliography), esp. 484–511.

⁵⁰ Ernst Würtwwein, *TDNT* 4.984–86; Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (JSNTSup 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 184–85.

⁵¹ Webb, *John the Baptizer* 184.

⁵² *Ibid.* 184–85 (quote from p. 184; emphasis added).

⁵³ Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom* 236. Matthew’s usage of στρέφω is canvassed by Jacques Dupont, “Matthieu 18,3: ἐὰν μὴ στραφῆτε καὶ γένησθε ὡς τὰ παῖδια,” in *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black* (ed. E. Earle Ellis and Max Wilcox; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969) 50–60. Statistically, Dupont shows that in the LXX στρέφω most often renders תּוּרַן, “turn” (*ibid.* 53), which in some of its instances is like שׁוּב in that it signals the reversal of a situation (*HALOT* [2001] 1.253–54).

To be sure, this is the broad backdrop to Jesus' admonition of the disciples, without there being a one-for-one correspondence between the Israel of old and those individuals called by Jesus to be his servants. However, the outstanding point of connection is the idolatry factor. The root cause of Israel's woes was, of course, the worship of other deities than the Lord. Given this covenantal orientation of "turn" or "return" in the prophets, it makes sense to think that Jesus is warning the disciples against another kind of idolatry—that of self. Instead of indulging their cravings for greatness and fame, they should return to their roots as members of a new covenant and take up again their role as servants. Even if στρέφω is auxiliary and adverbial ("become children again"), the point is that the disciples should become what they already were when they first became members of the kingdom. While this is not "conversion" in the customary evangelical sense, it is a return to their initial identity and calling.

5. *The answer to the disciples' question (18:4).* With the way prepared by the object lesson and the demand to turn, accounting for the "therefore" (οὖν) of verse 4, Jesus now answers the question of his followers and, in so doing, paradoxically (re)defines what "greatness" in God's kingdom is all about: "the greatest" is the one who "humbles himself like this child." "This child" subsequently becomes "one such child" (v. 5) and especially "these little ones" (vv. 6, 10, 14). R. T. France shows how "little ones" is a synonym of "disciple." From verse 5 onward, the literal child is left behind and the disciples as "little ones" become the focus of the teaching. "This term for disciples therefore calls attention to the theme of true greatness, the demand that the disciples should not ape the world's ideas of status and importance. . . ."⁵⁴ It is useful to recall that according to Jesus own pronouncement of Matt 11:11 and Luke 7:28, John the Baptist was "the greatest born of women." Yet this epithet is predicated of one who was locked away in prison awaiting death.

It is in keeping with this reassessment of greatness that to "humble oneself" says it all. Commentators point to the fact that the verb in question (ταπεινῶ) is associated with the smallness of children. But Luz would appear to be closer to the mark; that is, while ταπεινο- can be associated with physical smallness, its primary meaning is "low" or "humble" (the antithesis of ταπεινῶ is ὑψῶ, 23:12). In other words, here is "One who is low is insignificant, impotent, weak, and lives in poor circumstances."⁵⁵ For this reason,

⁵⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 264–65 (quote from p. 265).

⁵⁵ Luz, *Matthew 8–20* 428. Jeremias has overstated the case in maintaining that children, like women, were counted as "things of little value" in the first century (*New Testament Theology* 227). The same applies to John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 266–69. More balanced is Gundry-Volf, "Least and Greatest" 38. The rabbinic triad (cited by Jeremias) "deaf and dumb, weak-minded, under age," as predicated of children, may or may not have been extant in the first century. In any event, the saying does not provide a meaningful commentary on Matt 18:4. Davies/Allison recognize Jeremias's exaggeration, but still correctly inform us that one does not find ancient Jewish texts

“[d]isciples who are like children are thus small, insignificant, and without power. Something of that is sense is expressed in the following verses when for Matthew ‘little’ church members are caught in a snare (vv. 6–9), or when they lose their way and are as helpless as lost sheep (vv. 12–13).”⁵⁶ Luz continues that *ταπεινο-* in Matthew signifies “the entire condition of lowliness, not merely the inward attitude of humility.” As to its practical value, “humbling oneself” or “becoming low” is “to reverse completely one’s previous standards of thought and action and to orient one’s life to a different order and to new standards.” To this end, “One must work at the practice of lowliness.”⁵⁷ This call for self-humbling corresponds to 23:11–12: “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (perhaps derived from Prov 29:23; Ezek 21:26). In turn, this brand of servanthood is the outworking of 16:24: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

But one noteworthy qualification is in order. It is “one such child” (v. 5) and “these little ones” (vv. 6, 10, 14) who are nothing less than the agents of the coming of the kingdom, because to receive them is to receive the king himself. Kupp, as noted above, has drawn attention to Matthew 18 as an instance of Jesus’ presence with the gathered assembly. In accord with this datum, the discourse on the community in 18:1–35 is introduced by the disciples’ question about their relative status in the kingdom. After Jesus’ rejection of their overconfidence in verses 2–4, in verses 5–20 the emphasis turns to the “little ones,” those who have become childlike and humble disciples and to their reception by others. The “little ones” have a special status in the world; to receive them is to receive Jesus himself. Here, writes Kupp, is a critical principle in understanding Jesus’ presence among his people. That is to say, there is a special identification between the “little ones” and Jesus. Matthew began with a child “in their midst” (ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν), and afterward Jesus declares that he is “in their midst” (εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν) (18:20).⁵⁸ Since, then, we are moving in the realm of metaphor, the disciples are not to be regarded as peons or nonentities but as the emissaries of the Christ. They are individuals who will qualify themselves, by self-humbling, to be entrusted with the keys of the kingdom (16:19). Because they occupy such a position of responsibility, it is an offense of enormous magnitude to cause one of them to stumble (18:6) or even to despise them (18:10–14). This is the other side of the coin. And it is precisely because of their calling that the disciples must take to heart Jesus’ admonition to become as children. Otherwise, they will expend their time, energy, and talents on intramural rivalries and fail to fulfill their commission as the “sent ones”

in which children are examples to be imitated (*Matthew* 2.759). Likewise, Gundry-Volf, “Least and Greatest” 39. Something unique is going on in our passage.

⁵⁶ Luz, *Matthew* 8–20 429.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel* 85–86. See the entire discussion in *ibid.* 85–88, 176–200.

(ἀπόστολοι) through whom the nations would believe and obey the risen Christ (28:19–20).

II. MARK 9:33–37

Mark 9:33–37 is subsumed under what Robert Gundry dubs “the explosive force of Jesus’ teaching,” Mark 9:33–50.⁵⁹ Geographically, as in Matthew (17:24), the scene of Mark’s account is set in Capernaum. As distinct from Matthew, instead of the disciples approaching Jesus with the question, “Who is the greatest?” it is Jesus who inquires, “What were you discussing in the way.” This question, remarks Gundry, implies that he gave this passion and resurrection prediction “on the road” (Mark 9:30–32), just as he had given the first one “on the road” (Mark 8:31–33).⁶⁰ Gundry’s rendering “on the road” is literally “in the way” (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ). Rikki Watts, among others, has argued that there is a “way” theme in Mark that reflects Isaiah’s new exodus motif, whereby Yahweh returns to Zion for enthronement.⁶¹ In both cases, Jerusalem is the goal of the “way.”⁶² Gundry objects to this identification of ὁδός with the way of discipleship that follows Jesus to the cross,⁶³ but Watts’s reply, in my view, adequately answers his criticisms.⁶⁴ Best is right that “Mark’s Gospel is the gospel of The Way.” “It is a way in which Jesus, the Lord, goes and it is a way to which he calls his followers. ‘Followers’ is indeed

⁵⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 507. Craig A. Evans adds that the sudden shift from the disciples being afraid to question Jesus about his death and resurrection (9:32) to the issue of greatness is less abrupt if Mark’s point has more to do with Jesus’ impressive teaching, which is “all the more impressive since it is given in the face of anticipated death rather than with the alternating moods of the disciples” (*Mark 8:27–16:20* [WBC 34b; Nashville: Nelson, 2001] 60). The discourse of 9:33–50 is commonly seen to be held together by a series of catchword associations. See Marshall, *Faith as a Theme* 155; Urban C. von Wahlde, “Mark 9:33–50: Discipleship: The Authority that Serves,” *BZ* 29 (1985) 49–52.

⁶⁰ Gundry, *Mark* 508.

⁶¹ The enthronement motif corresponds to the expectation that the Messiah would construct the eschatological temple. See Steven M. Bryan, *Jesus and Israel’s Traditions of Judgement and Restoration* (SNTSMS 117; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 189–235.

⁶² Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus and Mark* (WUNT 2/88; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 123–36 *et passim*. The same cause is taken up by Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 612–53; and Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992) 12–47. Earlier, there was Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTSup 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981) 15–18; idem, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 1–16; idem, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) esp. 134–59; cf. idem, “Mark’s Narrative Technique,” *JSNT* 37 (1989) 43–58; Sharyn Dowd and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Significance of Jesus’ Death in Mark: Narrative Context and Authorial Audience,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 271–97, without endorsing their particular view of “ransom” in Mark 10:45, as rightly critiqued by Adela Yarbo Collins, “Mark’s Interpretation of the Death of Jesus,” *JBL* 128 (2009) 545–50.

⁶³ Gundry, *Mark* 441–42.

⁶⁴ Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus* 128–32.

the characteristic word which Jesus uses to men: ‘Follow me’ is the challenge to those who would be his disciples (1:17; 1:20; 2:14).⁶⁵

It makes perfect sense, then, to read Jesus’ question, “What were you discussing in the way?” as an implicit rebuke of the self-seeking of the disciples, who should have been sensitive to the meaning and purpose of the “way” leading to the capital city and the events that were to transpire there.⁶⁶ The journey was meant to be one of imitation of him. Therefore, in spite of the difference between the “setup” of the greatness question, its context and occasion are the same for both Matthew and Mark, namely, the Lord’s servanthood culminating in suffering, rejection, and death. For our purposes, it is especially striking that Mark 8:34–38 enjoins self-denial, bearing the cross, and loss of life in order for one to be his follower. As in Matthew, in Mark also there is a startling juxtaposition between the Lord and his disciples. Jesus is concerned to bear the shame and suffering of the cross, while the disciples are enamored only of the glory of reputation and power. As Evans puts it, it is ironic that they chose to discuss this topic in view of the grim teaching regarding Jesus’ suffering and death in the previous pericope: “on the way to Jesus’ death in Jerusalem, they talk of personal advancement.”⁶⁷

Mark indicates that the disciples gave no response to the question, but instead “kept silent” (the imperfect ἐσιώπων), presumably because they were ashamed to respond.⁶⁸ R. T. France’s observation is much to the point. It was a challenge to bring into the open a debate of which they were ashamed and of which they knew Jesus would not approve. “There is an almost comical incongruity in the picture of these grown men acting like schoolboys before the teacher, an impression which is only heightened when Jesus goes on to use a child as an example to them.”⁶⁹ It is Mark who provides the answer: “on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” As linked with 8:32, Adele Yarbo Collins suggests that just as the disciples do not wish to hear anything further of the suffering of the Son of Man, and do not wish to suffer themselves, so here each wants not only to be great, but to be greater than the others.⁷⁰ Gundry maintains that the verb originally used by Jesus, “discuss” (διαλογίζομαι), emphasizes the reasoning element in argument, while the switch by Mark to another verb, “dispute” (διαλέγομαι), singles out the verbal element in argument.⁷¹ If he is right, Jesus asks about the content of their discussion, but Mark indicates that the manner of their dispute was “hot and heavy.” This was not an academic disquisition but a

⁶⁵ Best, *Disciples and Discipleship* 5.

⁶⁶ A comparable insensitivity appears in Luke 9:51–56: Jesus sets his face to go up to Jerusalem, but the “sons of thunder” are indignant that a Samaritan village would not receive them.

⁶⁷ Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* 61, quoting Paul J. Achtemeier, “An Exposition of Mark 9:30–37,” *Int* 30 (1976) 179.

⁶⁸ “The silence of the disciples is a wordless confession” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* [Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] 286).

⁶⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 373.

⁷⁰ Adele Yarbo Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; New York: Doubleday, 2007) 444 (see further *ibid.* 441).

⁷¹ Gundry, *Mark* 508.

belligerent falling-out (“knock down-drag out”) involving elevated emotions and pride.⁷²

Assuming the authoritative sitting position of a teacher,⁷³ Jesus calls the Twelve and tells them: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (as in 10:43–44). Here the adjective changes from “greatest” to “first,” making the two synonymous. That being “first” was much on their minds is indicated by its emphatic position in the sentence (πρῶτος εἶναι).⁷⁴ Evans notes that in the Jewish culture of this period, being “first” (πρῶτος) meant ruler, aristocrats, ruling priests, and other persons of authority and influence. On the other hand, “last” (ἔσχατος) and “servant” (διάκονος) are predicated of those with no rank, no authority, no privilege, a status that humans ordinarily do not covet.⁷⁵ Jesus, then, insists on an unprecedented kind of “eschatological role reversal” on the part of his community,⁷⁶ one that goes against the grain not only of “the kings of the earth” (Matt 17:25 with Mark 10:42) but of contemporary Jewish values as well.⁷⁷ And not only so, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of *all* and servant of *all*!” The link is with 8:34: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, let him take up his cross and follow me.” William Lane is worth quoting at length:

By transforming the question of greatness into the task-orientation of service, Jesus established a new pattern for human relationships which leaves no occasion for strife or opposition toward one another. The disciples’ thoughts were upon the period of glory, when questions of rank seemed appropriate. . . . Jesus redirected them to his insistence that the way to glory leads through suffering and death. The point of suffering is here located in the service to be accomplished, where service means specifically sacrifice for others. The disciples cannot order their relationships as they please but are to recognize in one another men under whom they place themselves as servants. Jesus thus de-

⁷² The heatedness of the dispute still follows even if there is no effective difference between *διαλογίζομαι* and *διαλέγομαι*, as advocated by Harry Fleddermann, “The Discipleship Discourse (Mark 9:33–50),” *CBQ* 43 (1981) 59, n. 13, who cites G. D. Kilpatrick, “*διαλέγεσθαι* and *διαλογίζεσθαι* in the New Testament,” *JTS* 11 (1960) 338–40.

⁷³ See Marcus, *Mark 8–16* 673–74.

⁷⁴ Gundry notes that the position of “first” (πρῶτος) before “to be” (εἶναι) emphasizes firstness and that the chiasmic positions of “last” (ἔσχατος) and “servant” (διάκονος) strengthen the contrast between firstness and lastness (*Mark* 509). The chiasmic structure of 9:33–34 is laid out by Marcus, *Mark 8–16* 680.

⁷⁵ Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* 61. As regards “first,” Evans cites Josephus, *Ant.* 11.5.3 §§140–41; 18.3.3 §§63–64; 18.5.3 §121; Luke 19:47; Acts 25:2; 28:17.

⁷⁶ Gundry-Volf, “Least and Greatest” 43.

⁷⁷ Evans (*Mark 8:27–16:20* 61) points out that questions of rank and priority were not uncommon in the Mediterranean world, including Jewish Palestine (1QS 2:19–23; 5:20–24; 6:3–5, 8–10; 1QS_a 2:11–22; Luke 14:7–11, in the tradition of Prov 25:6–7; Sir 3:18, 20). Edwards (*Mark* 286) calls particular attention to 1QS 2:19–23, according to which there was a proper order of procession into the assembly, “so that all the children of Israel may know their standing in God’s community in conformity with the eternal plan. And no one shall move down from his rank nor move up from the place of his lot.” Str-B (4/2.1, 130–31, 165) document that rabbinic authors often discussed the seating order in paradise. The importance of “the best seats in the house” in this life is attested by Matt 23:6–7; Mark 12:38–39; Luke 11:43; 14:7–11; 20:46.

cided their question in a way which is in keeping with his proclamation of his own messianic vocation.⁷⁸

Again in accord with Matthew, a child is selected as the object lesson of servanthood. The correlation of “child” (παῖδιον) and “servant” (δούλος) is also the same as in Matthew: both are under authority and have no choice but to obey orders.⁷⁹ The lone child (ἐν τῶν τοιοῦτων παιδίων) whom Jesus embraces is the representative of all those who will be received in his name. Achtemeier comments that by embracing the child Jesus is “acting out a parable on what it means to be great.”⁸⁰ Matthew 18:5 also relates that “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” But Mark adds: “and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” His version highlights the paradigmatic character of Jesus’ own sending by the Father and the latter’s reception by believers. This, in turn, is mirrored by the disciples’ sending resulting in the reception of Jesus by those who welcome him. The role model provided by the child is thus to this effect: if Jesus is the child/servant (see above) who humbly accepts the commission of his Father, then the disciples must assume the same role in relation to him.⁸¹ Their business is not to squabble about the high places of the kingdom, which even Jesus is not able to bestow (Mark 10:40), but to emulate him as representatives of the kingdom of God, whose ultimate goal is the reception of the God of the kingdom.⁸² If anything will turn their self-absorption into genuine discipleship, it is conformity to his example. Evans states it well: “The disciples are to adopt Jesus’ values and perspectives if they are to be important in God’s

⁷⁸ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 340.

⁷⁹ To reiterate from before, children had no discernible status in ancient cultures. Richard A. Horsley puts it in these terms: “‘Childhood’ is an invention of modern Western society. Childhood had no social reality before. Childhood should therefore not be idealized or romanticized. In Ancient Palestine, as in most any traditional agrarian society, children were the human beings with the lowest status. They were, in effect, not-yet-people” (*Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001] 189). See the further categorization of the status of children in Mark by Marshall, *Faith as a Theme* 156–57; Peter Spitaler, “Welcoming a Child as a Metaphor for Welcoming God’s Kingdom: A Close Reading of Mark 10.13–16,” *JSNT* 31 (2009) 424–25. For further literature, see *ibid.* 429–30, n. 15. However, Spitaler’s revival of the thesis that “child” is a direct object (“whoever does not receive God’s kingdom as one receives a child”) is adequately answered by Gundry, *Mark* 550–51. The argument is applicable to Luke 18:15 but not to Mark 9:33–37.

⁸⁰ Achtemeier, “Mark 9:30–37” 182. Black also writes of the “acted Parable of the Child in the Midst.” For Black, the figure of the child draws on the ambiguity of the Aramaic *talya*, which, like its Greek counterparts, is both “child” and “servant” (*Aramaic Approach* 218–23). Marcus similarly writes of “the Parable of the Child,” but understands “child” in the literal, not metaphorical sense (*Mark 8–16* 681).

⁸¹ Gundry-Volf adds: “The child thus represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure. Welcoming the child signifies receiving Jesus and affirming his divinely given mission as the suffering Son of Man” (“Least and Greatest” 45).

⁸² Collins’s denial that this saying pertains to a missionary context, but rather is an exhortation for parents to accept rather than expose their children (*Mark* 445–46), bewilderingly misses the point. The same line is taken by Marcus (*Mark 8–16* 682–83). Correctly, there are France, *Mark* 375; Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker 2008) 444–45.

kingdom. . . . The disciples have just begun to realize what following Jesus will entail.”⁸³

III. LUKE 9:46–48

Robert Tannehill’s analysis of the narrative unity of Luke-Acts serves to highlight the setting of Luke 9:46–48. The passage forms part of the longer section termed by Tannehill “Jesus and the Disciples” (4:31–9:50) and more narrowly “The Disciples’ Failures in Luke 9:37–50.” To appreciate the point of “the disciples’ failures,” it is necessary to back up to the Transfiguration narrative (9:28–36). The three disciples present on that occasion were not fully aware of what was happening and responded in an inappropriate manner. These indications of weakness, writes Tannehill, are reinforced by the series of scenes that follows through the rest of chapter 9, wherein the disciples fail to respond as disciples should.

Thus at the beginning of a new stage of their instruction, the narrator presents the disciples as seriously lacking in understanding and in need of Jesus’ correction. In light of this situation, we can understand the reason for the extensive and emphatic teaching to the disciples during Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. We can also understand the urgency, for Jesus is aware that the time for his teaching is now limited.⁸⁴

In common with Matt 18:1–4 and Mark 9:33–37, the present passage is impacted by the announcement of Jesus’ death in Jerusalem, the city where the prophets die.⁸⁵ Luke states it in these terms: “Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask him about this saying” (9:44–45). This reaction of the disciples is directly parallel to Mark 9:32.⁸⁶ Then, beginning at 9:51 (to 19:44), the trek to the capital city begins with Jesus’ determination to arrive there and encounter what awaits him. Thus,

⁸³ Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* 62. Marcus calls attention to the larger dimension of Mark’s Christology in the saying of 9:37. “The one who receives Jesus receives not Jesus alone but God as well, a statement in line with the strong connection of the two figures from the beginning of the Gospel. The way of Jesus the Messiah is the way of the Lord (1:1–3), and some of the healing stories have implied that where Jesus is acting, there God is powerfully present (2:7, 10; 5:19–20)” (*Mark 8–16* 683).

⁸⁴ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. Volume 1: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 225. John Nolland suggests that the link of the greatness question in Luke’s version with the Transfiguration is the privilege of the three in being witnesses to the event: “they played host (or tried to) to the figures of glory.” Or more generally, he continues, the questioning is to be linked to the sense of importance the disciples attached to their own special link to Jesus (*Luke 9:21–18:34* [WBC 35b; Dallas: Word, 1993] 518).

⁸⁵ Jon A. Weatherly, *Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSup 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 50–175, 225–42; Kim Huat Tan, *The Zion Traditions and the Aims of Jesus* (SNTSMS 91; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 57–80.

⁸⁶ The inability of the disciples to understand the cross is a Markan motif. See Whitney Taylor Shiner, *Follow Me! Disciples in Markan Rhetoric* (SBLDS 145; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 278–84.

like Mark, there is a “way” motif in the Third Gospel.⁸⁷ Luke’s notation of 9:51 (53) that “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” finds precedents in Tanakh. Craig Evans has shown that the expression “set your face” occurs frequently in Ezekiel, every time in a context having to do with judgment. Evans singles out Ezek 21:7–11 in particular. Ezekiel, he notes, is a book that has influenced significant portions of Luke, including the “Son of Man” designation.⁸⁸ These points are well-taken and really beyond dispute. But I would propose that Luke’s Greek (καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ πρόσωπον ἐστήρισεν τοῦ πορεύεσθαι εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ) is also an echo of Isa 50:7b, where the Servant of Yahweh declares: “I have set my face like a flint” (ἔθηκα τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ὡς στερεὰν πέτραν). In context, the Servant is confident that in the end the Lord will vindicate him against his enemies (vv. 7c–9); but until then, he must give his back to the smiters and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard, and not hide his face from shame and spitting (v. 6). These associations are very much in keeping with Jesus’ determination to go up Jerusalem and identify himself with Yahweh’s suffering Servant.

It is in between the announcement of his death (9:44–45) and the commencement of the final journey to Jerusalem (9:51) that the question of greatness arises for the first time in this Gospel, followed by the disciples’ forbidding a man to cast out demons in Jesus’ name (vv. 49–50).⁸⁹ When Luke 9:44–45 is compared with the parallels in Matthew and Mark, it can be seen that the emphasis has shifted from the passion announcement to the statement of the disciples’ failure to understand the saying. As Tannehill

⁸⁷ See Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel’s Re-gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts* (BZNW 138; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006) 248–49. On Luke’s travel narrative more broadly considered, there are Floyd V. Filson, “The Journey Motif in Luke-Acts,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday* (eds. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin; Exeter: Paternoster, 1970) 68–77; David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Moessner’s book is especially valuable as it connects Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem with the rejected prophet of Deuteronomy. He is the prophet like Moses who falls victim to a still stiff-necked Israel which killed the prophets sent to them. Earlier, the Jesus/Mosaic prophet motif was outlined by Paul S. Minear, *To Heal and Reveal: The Prophetic Vocation According to Luke* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 102–21. The leading themes of the Lukan journey are sketched by Jerome Kodell, “Luke and the Children: The Beginning and End of the Great Interpolation (Luke 9:46–56; 18:9–23),” *CBQ* 49 (1987) 427–30.

⁸⁸ Craig A. Evans, “‘He Set His Face’: On the Meaning of Luke 9:51,” in Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 100–102.

⁸⁹ The presence of this “outsider exorcist” in the narrative is probably intended to make the point that just as the disciples must maintain childlike humility in the service of their Lord, they must also be aware that “he does not restrict the use of his powerful name only to them . . . they must retain an attitude of openness, even of tolerance, toward the outsider who would extend the divine bounty that he was sent to dispense to unfortunate human beings” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* [AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981] 819–20). Nolland’s proposal that the disciples attached a special importance to their association with Jesus would certainly apply here (n. 84 above). The parallel in Mark is 9:38–41. See Marshall, *Faith as a Theme* 157–58; Fleddermann, “Discipleship Discourse” 64–66. “The disciples’ exclusivism is rejected, as was their self-seeking” (ibid. 66).

further notes, the disciples were supposed to “know the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (8:10), and the three leading apostles were told by the heavenly voice to “hear him” (9:35). “But on this crucial point they do not hear with understanding. The disciples are failing to learn what they need to know. . . . They were ignorant of the meaning of the Scriptures and of the plan of God.”⁹⁰ Consequently, “It is those who do not understand Jesus’ degrading role of the servant, most strikingly revealed in his suffering, who would engage in disputes about greatness.”⁹¹

As to its content, this pericope is essentially a reiteration of what we have seen in the previous passages. There is the example of the child, along with the pronouncement that the one who is least among the disciples is actually great. I would simply underscore several points from before. (1) There is the paradox that greatness consists in lowliness. The one who is “least” (μικρότερος), according to Nolland, is “the one who does not stand upon his dignity but is prepared to be identified with the lowly and to receive them knowing that in so doing he, hiddenly, keeps company with the greatest of the great.”⁹² (2) In selecting the child, comments Joel Green, “Jesus . . . turns the social pyramid upside down, undermining the very conventions that led the disciples to deliberate over relative greatness within the company of disciples and, indeed, that had led the disciples away from any proper understanding of Jesus’ status.”⁹³ Fitzmyer adds that the episode insists on “a rigorous humility in inner-community relationships.” The child is the sign of Christian greatness precisely as the least significant and weakest member of human society. Moreover, the saying and the illustration contain both a Christological and an ecclesiological import. Jesus, in his mission as the one sent by the Father, can identify with such lowliness. In order to accept and esteem God and his emissary, one has to be prepared to accept and esteem even the smallest of human society. “Jesus is, therefore, calling for a similar attitude among those who will be his followers in their dealings with one another.”⁹⁴ Given that in Luke 18:15 the disciples rebuff the children who come to Jesus for blessing, the object lesson of the child in 9:46–47 takes on an additional element of admonition of the Twelve. As Nolland puts it, “Just as the disciples considered Jesus too important to receive children . . . so they thought the same for themselves. To give attention to children would detract from their exalted status.”⁹⁵ (3) Although childhood represents humility in the sense of servanthood and willingness to do the will of another, Howard Marshall is correct that this saying has to do with the worth of the child, to the extent that receiving the child is tantamount to receiving Jesus himself.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 226–27.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 227–28.

⁹² Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* 520.

⁹³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 391–92.

⁹⁴ Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX* 816.

⁹⁵ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* 519.

⁹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 397. Marshall further suggests that there is here an identification between Jesus and the little ones along the lines of Yahweh’s close link with the needy in the OT.

IV. LUKE 22:24–30

If the way of the cross provides the setting and context for all the above passages, Luke 22:24–30 brings us to the end of the way and places the question of greatness in the very shadow of the cross.⁹⁷ The irony is unmistakable. It is immediately after the first Lord's Supper, with everything symbolized by it, that the dispute erupts for the final time: "which of them was to be regarded as the greatest." Tannehill situates verses 24–30 within 22:21–62, which depicts "a broad ranging crisis in the relation between Jesus and the apostles due to a series of interrelated failures in following Jesus."⁹⁸ Much of the farewell discourse at the table is devoted to exposing the errant attitudes and behavior of the disciples, which, in part, is already evident in their actions. At the table, Jesus moves directly from his words over the meal to the announcement of his betrayal. While in Matthew (26:22) and Mark (14:19) this announcement causes grief and self-examination, in Luke it engenders a dispute wherein the disciples are looking for a villain (v. 23: "And they began to question one another, which of them it was that would do this"). "This leads directly to the dispute about greatness in 22:24, for self-defense against a charge leads easily to claims of superiority. This dispute highlights the apostles' persistent failure, even in the last hours before Jesus' death, to heed his previous teaching about the least being great."⁹⁹ Nelson agrees that the questioning of verse 23 is the immediate occasion of the dispute about greatness.¹⁰⁰

Luke's setting of the stage is sufficiently noteworthy to draw out a bit further. Green's comment is much to the point. Although one of the Twelve will "betray" Jesus, Luke ironically suggests that all of them will "betray" his basic kingdom message with its immediate implications for the issues of status and position.

If Jesus' prophecy concerning the inclusion of a betrayer among his table intimates was stunning (vv. 21–23), so too is the behavior of the others gathered around him. A woe had been pronounced over the betrayer because

Nolland's additional point is well-taken: in Luke Jesus places the child beside himself and not in the midst of the disciples. "The child is not now to be compared with the disciples; he is to be compared with Jesus himself" (*Luke 9:21–18:34* 519).

⁹⁷ The passage receives comprehensive treatment by Peter K. Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24–30* (SBLDS 138; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), to whom I must defer on numerous exegetical details.

⁹⁸ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 263.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 263. Tannehill is right that there was failure on the part of the disciples. However, his word "faithlessness" is too strong a term. Schuyler Brown has shown adequately enough that the apostles did persevere during the several events of the passion. According to Luke 22:28, "You are those who have continued with me [οἱ διαμεμνηκότες μετ' ἐμοῦ] in my trials." Even Peter's denial was not a loss of faith (*Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke* [AnBib 36; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969] 62–74). Joseph A. Fitzmyer agrees: "In Luke's story, the disciples do not always comprehend, but they do not desert him" (*The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV* [AB 28a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985] 1418). Judas, I would add, was the only actual apostate.

¹⁰⁰ Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 139–42.

of his departure from a fundamental orientation around the values of the kingdom; so, too, do the other apostles now insinuate by means of their behavior that their commitments remain surprisingly unreconstructed. Jesus' message on his own self-giving, presented so passionately in vv. 15–20, seems to have fallen on deaf ears.¹⁰¹

But, as Green continues, even this dispute becomes an opportunity for teaching. The movement from verses 24–27 to verses 28–30 entails a reversal, with the latter articulating the ultimate faithfulness of the disciples and their participation in Jesus' royal leadership, in spite of their current failure. This transposition is possible because of the manner in which Jesus redefines the relationship between authority and status (v. 27). "Jesus wants his disciples to lead, but in a wholly unconventional way."¹⁰²

One of Luke's distinctives is the phrasing of the question: "Which of them was to be *regarded as* the greatest?" This is the precise point of the "contention" or "invidious dispute" (φιλονεικία).¹⁰³ Marshall observes that the verb "regarded" or "seemed" (δοκέω) is used intransitively to signify how the disciples would appear to people in general—"for it is the question of how they will appear in the eyes of others that is worrying them."¹⁰⁴ Nelson supplements this basic observation by calling attention to the culture of honor and shame in the ancient Near East. According to Nelson, "Although for many modern people it is a virtue to be unaffected by the opinions of others, in the ancient Near East the same trait would commonly have been thought of as a vice." Nelson continues that Jesus' response in verses 25–27 does not actually constitute an answer to the disciples' question, because the question itself reveals an attitude that he opposes, and so it is not surprising that it is left unanswered.¹⁰⁵ He was not about to legitimize a question that should have never arisen in the first place.

However, there was most certainly a response to this most recent clash. Instead of the positive example of a child (who would not have been present at the Supper), Jesus chooses the negative instance of worldly rulers: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors." The first of the two figures, the kings, "make their political power felt."¹⁰⁶ Green notes that no special attention is called to singularly wicked kings or those who have particularly abused power. Instead, Jesus seems to have in mind the normal routine of kings exercising their rule and those for whom the use of authority is a means for gaining status honor.¹⁰⁷ The second, "benefactor" (εὐεργέτης), was an honorific title in the Greco-Roman world bestowed on princes, emperors, and the gods. John Nolland relates that in the honor culture of that world public recogni-

¹⁰¹ Green, *Luke* 766.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 766–67.

¹⁰³ Fitzmyer's terminology. On φιλονεικία, see Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 142–44.

¹⁰⁴ Marshall, *Luke* 811.

¹⁰⁵ Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 144–45 (quote from 144).

¹⁰⁶ Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV* 1416.

¹⁰⁷ Green, *Luke* 767–68.

tion in various forms was a requirement for those who were clients of the benefactor.¹⁰⁸ Green adds that the emperor modeled what was expected of the wealthy elite in every locale. This pattern of benefaction and patronage was pervasive, so that the reception of gifts from the benefactor brought with it obligations for service and honor. “The concern of the text, then, is not with abuses of the system by which leadership was exercised and legitimated, but with the nature of the system itself.”¹⁰⁹

The force of these illustrations is clear enough: the disciples wanted to be acclaimed as the kings and benefactors of that era, wielding power and receiving honor, titles, and benefits (perks) appropriate to their calling as Jesus’ sent ones.¹¹⁰ And it is just for this reason he retorts, “But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” Green once more conveys a useful insight. Jesus is not teaching his followers that they cannot be rulers or benefactors in any sense; rather, “their manner of ruling and benefaction must be utterly transformed.” Jesus’ own ministry is summarized by Acts 10:38 as one of benefaction, “doing good” (εὐεργέτω). But, according to him, the disciples are to be like God by doing good and expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:35–36).¹¹¹ Reinforcement of this demand comes by way of: “let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” These images are familiar enough by now. Suffice it to say that there is an obvious juxtaposition of “youngest” and “serve” with “greatest,” “kings,” “those in authority,” and “leader.”¹¹² “The form of leadership appropriate to Jesus’ community, then, is one that is unconcerned with the accrual of status honor but itself reflects the humility of table servants and of those who occupy the bottom rung of social power and privilege, the young.”¹¹³ The point is driven home by the rhetorical question, “For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves?” The answer is obvious: of course, the one who serves is lower than the one who is a guest at the table. In today’s terms, the “leaders”

¹⁰⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53* (WBC 35c; Dallas: Word, 1993) 1064. On the Greco-Roman materials, see further Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 150–55; Frederick W. Danker, “The Endangered Benefactor in Luke-Acts,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1981 Seminar Papers* (ed. Kent Harold Richards; Chico, CA: Scholar Press, 1981) esp. 39–43.

¹⁰⁹ Green, *Luke* 768.

¹¹⁰ The argument of David Lull, “The Servant-Benefactor as a Model of Greatness (Luke 22:24–30),” *NovT* 28 (1986) 289–305, that “benefactor” is to be taken in a positive rather than a negative sense is adequately answered by Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 132–35. Later, Nelson offers the comment that at stake is not merely a social status that attends positions of leadership but “preoccupation” with such status (*ibid.* 155).

¹¹¹ Green, *Luke* 768.

¹¹² That “youngest” (νεώτερος) was chosen rather than “least” reflects the ancient Near Eastern setting. Nelson explains that in this culture the aged were granted great respect and even veneration. Their standing was not unlike that accorded to benefactors (*Leadership and Discipleship* 156–57).

¹¹³ Green, *Luke* 769. See additionally Green’s discussion of Luke’s “egalitarian community” in *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 117–21.

are “servers” and “busboys” in the kingdom.¹¹⁴ If the Twelve should find this “waiter” image offensive, then they need to take to heart that the Lord casts himself in such a role: “I am among you as one who serves.” In other words, “I wait on tables myself.”¹¹⁵ The upshot is:

He does not deny . . . that some will lead, and so on; after all, he has been portrayed within the Lukan narrative as lord and king. He insists, rather, that his status as lord and king, as greatest, is expressed in the shape of his service, which is so integral to his character that it will determine the manner of his comportment with the faithful even in the eschaton (12:35–38). So also must it be the defining quality of the apostles—who, then, are to turn from their obsession with their own status to a comparable attentiveness to the needs of others.¹¹⁶

This pericope takes a turn at verse 28. In spite of their numerous failings, and particularly their recurrent disputations about “Who is the greatest?” Jesus can still say to the disciples, “You are those who have continued with me in my trials.”¹¹⁷ For this reason, he will reward their faithful endurance by ultimately granting them positions of leadership: he will confer on them a kingdom, and they will share his regal glory.¹¹⁸ There is going to be an eschatological banquet, and the Twelve will occupy honored seats at the table. Their experience follows suit with Jesus’ own, the one who was king from his birth and yet whose enthronement awaits final exaltation: first the suffering and then the glory (Luke 24:26, 46). This is the paradox of discipleship.¹¹⁹ Given the testimonial character of the Last Supper, Fuller underscores that one of the key features of this farewell address is the appointment and well-being of Jesus’ successors. “In Jerusalem, the ancient seat of Israelite power and the expected capital of the eschatological kingdom, Jesus appoints the core membership of the newly re-gathered Israel as the eschatological ‘judges.’”¹²⁰ But also given that this testimonial discourse takes the specific form of a meal, Moessner’s study is once again relevant. Moessner demonstrates that the “way” motif of Luke (9:51–19:44) contains a signifi-

¹¹⁴ Fuller refers to Luke Timothy Johnson, who argues that waiting on tables is to be understood in terms of possessing authority. “The authority of the Twelve over Israel is to be expressed in their διακονεῖν τραπέζαις (Acts 6:2).” Moreover, “The authority of the Twelve possesses a certain paradoxical character. It is the full prophetic power of Jesus for judgment, but it is expressed through the mundane symbol of handling the community of goods, ‘waiting on tables’” (*Restoration of Israel* 253, n. 231, quoting Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* [SBLDS 39; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977] 167).

¹¹⁵ Jesus’ servanthood, as particularly evident at the Last Supper, is elaborated by Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 161–71.

¹¹⁶ Green, *Luke* 769.

¹¹⁷ See at length Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 179–97.

¹¹⁸ In v. 29, διατίθῃμι may be simply “confer” or “bestow” a kingdom (καὶ γὰρ διατίθεμαι ὑμῖν καθὼς διέθετό μοι ὁ πατήρ μου βασιλείαν). See Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 200–205 (on the content and timing of the conferral, see *ibid.* 205–30). However, as Fuller (along with others) has pointed out, Luke portrays the Supper as a testamentary discourse, rendering it as likely that the verb means “bequeath” a kingdom (*Restoration of Israel* 251–52).

¹¹⁹ Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship* 233–51.

¹²⁰ Fuller, *Restoration of Israel* 251.

cant number of references to Jesus and the disciples “eating and drinking” along the road to Jerusalem. All these instances serve to anticipate the Last Supper, which itself presages the end-time feast in the kingdom to come. “Jesus,” says Moessner, “is the host of a Passover-Passion meal that climaxes all of his eating and drinking during the journey.” It is as the suffering and rejected one that Jesus hosts the anticipatory meal of the consummate kingdom of God. By his suffering, “Jesus is the Mosaic Servant whose vicarious death establishes the new covenant in which the apostles will eat and drink and judge the tribes of Israel.”¹²¹

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this segment of the passage is that only those who are willing, for the present, to be “waiters” (v. 27) will be privileged guests at the “head table.” In the end, the disciples will receive the acclaim they desire, but only by way of servanthood and self-denial at the present time.¹²² This prospect is not in conflict with the previous verses. Jesus does not address the issue of who is *the* greatest. Rather, all twelve, in a “collegial” relationship, will sit on their thrones “judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”¹²³ The verb “judge” here means to “rule over.” As Fitzmyer states, “The apostles will thus become the rulers of the reconstituted Israel, the reconstituted people of God.”¹²⁴ Theirs will be a “royal rule.”¹²⁵

V. MATTHEW’S DISTINCTIVE OUTLOOK: ENTERING THE ESCHATOLOGICAL KINGDOM

In keeping with the basic architecture of NT eschatology, entering the kingdom in the Gospels assumes an already/not yet aspect.¹²⁶ With regard to the former, Joel Marcus has examined the biblical notion of entering the kingly power of God.¹²⁷ By a survey of OT, Jewish, and NT texts, Marcus concludes that what is at stake is “entering into an action.” This is a NT idiom, but one with Semitic roots. The action in question is God’s kingly power.

¹²¹ Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet* 181–82.

¹²² The kindred passage, Matt 19:27–30, extends the promise of twelve thrones to the disciples, along with other rewards, as a recompense for leaving everything and following Jesus.

¹²³ The text echoes Ps 122:3–5: “Jerusalem, built as a city which is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.”

¹²⁴ Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV* 1419.

¹²⁵ On the apostles as the “eschatological regents,” see Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 75–112; Craig A. Evans, “The Twelve Thrones of Israel: Scripture and Politics in Luke 22:24–30,” in Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 154–70. Evans rightly stresses that the restoration of the kingdom has been initiated, but also that the apostles have not yet eaten and drunk at Jesus’ kingly table: “Luke’s use of this tradition strongly implies that Israel has a future, but it is a future inextricably bound up with Christ’s reign, guaranteed by his resurrection, to which the apostolic preaching gives witness” (ibid. 170).

¹²⁶ The texts are conveniently surveyed by G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 174–80.

¹²⁷ Joel Marcus, “Entering into the Kingly Power of God,” *JBL* 107 (1988) 663–75.

The idea is not that of a physical movement into a (geographical) realm but of “participation in the already-inaugurated explosion of God’s power into the world.” Human beings are thus summoned “to join now in God’s apocalyptic battle.”¹²⁸ Most relevant for our purposes, the “already” of entering the kingdom is illustrated by Matt 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17. In each instance, becoming a child is made the precondition of coming under the reign of Jesus the king. The type of humility exemplified by children is of the same species as the instances we have considered above. Commenting on Mark 10:14, France succinctly states that Jesus has in mind not only or even mainly children but those who share the child’s status. “It is to such people, the insignificant ones who are important to Jesus . . . that God’s kingdom belongs.”¹²⁹ Or, as Marcus paraphrases: “Unless you receive God’s kingly power with an acknowledgement of total dependence, in the manner that a little child receives everything from its parent’s hand, you will never have a share in it.”¹³⁰

On the other hand, the “not yet” dimension to entrance into the kingdom is an outstanding motif in Matthew’s story of Jesus.¹³¹ It is Luomanen who has applied to the First Gospel E. P. Sanders’s now famous phrases “getting in” and “staying in,” as they epitomize “covenantal nomism” as the “pattern of religion” pertaining to ancient Judaism. Luomanen’s basic premise is that the structure of Matthew’s view of salvation can be detected by paying attention to the question of how he understands his religion to function in respect to final salvation.¹³² The bulk of the study is devoted an exposition of the many passages in Matthew that speak of a final salvation as contingent on “staying in” the community established by Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom (5:17–20; 7:15–23; 8:18–27; 11:25–30; 13:24–30, 36–43; 19:16–22; 19:23–20:16; 21:28–32; 21:33–46; 22:1–4; 25:31–46). In Matthew’s own time, Luomanen maintains, the new people had replaced Israel at the center of God’s purposes. Thus, those individuals who enter the community are to take over the commission which the former people of God failed to carry out: they are to be the faithful servants who fulfill the orders of their master; they are the recipients of the forgiveness of sins.¹³³

¹²⁸ Marcus, “Kingly Power” 674.

¹²⁹ France, *Mark* 397. Also, Marcus, *Mark 8–16* 718–19.

¹³⁰ Marcus, “Kingly Power” 673. On Mark 10:13–16, there is a great deal of helpful material from Judith M. Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13–16) and the Purpose of Mark,” in *The Child in the Bible* (eds. Terence E. Fretheim and Beverly Roberts Gaventa; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 143–76. Gundry also stresses the factor of dependence on God as the requirement for entering into his reign (ibid. 170–71). However, her main contention that Mark portrays Jesus as a lover of children, in order to remove the offense of the cross for Roman readers, is less than convincing.

¹³¹ Parallel idioms for entering the kingdom in this sense are “enter into life” (18:8–9; 19:17) and “enter into the joy of your Lord” (25:21, 23). The future dimension of Matthew’s eschatology is sketched by Donald A. Hagner, “Matthew’s Eschatology,” in *To Tell the Truth: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry* (JSNTSup 100; eds. Thomas E. Schmidt and Moisés Silva; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 54–59.

¹³² Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom* 44.

¹³³ Ibid. 278. See the nine point summary of Matthew’s “new Israel” (ibid. 281).

In Matthew’s view of salvation, the destiny of the individuals is tied to the future materialization of God’s kingdom. The members of the congregation are to face a universal judgment at which all people are to be judged on an equal basis. “Consequently, in the light of Matthew’s overall view of the structure of salvation, it appears that in practice the only way to pass the final judgment is to ‘follow Jesus,’ that is, to join Matthew’s congregation, where the right knowledge concerning the terms of salvation can be obtained.”¹³⁴ At this juncture, the paradigmatic significance of Matt 5:17–20 comes into play. That is to say, the concept of righteousness is used in a manner similar to that of contemporary Judaism: “It refers to human activity and designates the obedience that the people are supposed to show in their covenantal relationship with God.”¹³⁵ The other side of the coin is that Matthew’s understanding of the present character of salvation finds its fullest expression in God’s/Jesus’ presence in the congregation, as well as in the wholeness and rest which can be experienced when one’s life is subjected to the yoke of Jesus’ teaching. “Thus, on broad terms, Matthew’s understanding of the content of salvation can be determined as the restoration of the wholeness of life under God’s/Jesus’ rule and in his presence.”¹³⁶

Luomanen, as a consequence, concludes that when Matthew’s outlook on (final) salvation is compared with Sanders’s description of the pattern of covenantal nomism, it appears that many of the basic assumptions of this category play a central role in his thinking. But there is at least one very noticeable difference: in the end, what matters is a commitment to the person of Jesus. Luomanen points to the various ways Matthew ascribes to Jesus epithets and functions formerly connected to God, such as Jesus’ presence with the disciples until the end of the age.¹³⁷ He remarks that although Matthew and his congregation would not have denied Israel’s traditional monotheism, the high esteem ascribed to Jesus was enough to make their Jewish contemporaries suspicious of the “purity” of their faith. At any rate, according to Luomanen, when Matthew wrote his Gospel the correct understanding of Jesus as Lord defined the borderline between his community and Judaism.¹³⁸

Paul Foster confirms that “entering the kingdom” is a Matthean favorite, with the expression used five times in the Gospel (5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23–24; 23:13). On all these occasions, the expression occurs in negative contexts, addressing the audience emphatically by the double negative (οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃτε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν) (5:20; 18:3), outlining the difficulty (19:23–24), describing a prior condition that must be fulfilled (18:3), or correcting a false assumption about what is required to enter into the kingdom (7:21).¹³⁹ With

¹³⁴ Ibid. 279.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 280–81.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 280.

¹³⁷ See further Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel*, passim. Kupp shows that in the OT it is always Yahweh who says “I am with you” (ibid. 138–56), a datum that has definite ramifications for Matthew’s Christology.

¹³⁸ Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom* 282–83 (quote from 283).

¹³⁹ Paul Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel* (WUNT 2/177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 206–7.

5:20 particularly in view, Foster states that the verse reflects the evangelist's wider use whereby he warns his readers about "the precautionary attitude" that must be adopted by those who seek to enter into the kingdom.¹⁴⁰ John Meier supplements the picture by tying into the OT background for entering the kingdom. Two images are echoed by the Matthean language. The first is Israel's entrance into the Promised Land. The second and more proximate reference (in 5:20) is the requirements of cultic purity and ethical righteousness for entrance through the temple gates or the gates of Jerusalem. "The image has been projected here onto the apocalyptic screen of eschatological events, and so Mt 5.20 can take its place among the eschatological and apocalyptic logia of the gospels."¹⁴¹ The second observation calls to mind that there is a decided apocalyptic eschatology in Matthew.¹⁴²

The upshot of these data is that there is a future phase of admittance into the kingdom and that there are preconditions attached to "seeing God" in the sense of the Sixth Beatitude.¹⁴³ To be sure, it is possible to overstate the preconditions at the expense of the grace factor so evident in the Gospels generally and Matthew in particular. Writing of the Sermon on the Mount, Dale Allison counters interpreters who conceive of Matthew 5–7 as simply unremitting in its demands, with no particular hint as to how they are to be met. Such a view fails to understand four crucial portions of the discourse: 4:23–5:2; 5:3–12; 6:25–34; 7:7–11. From these segments of the Sermon he deduces: "The God who demands is at the same time the Father who from day to day is with and for his children; he is a giver of gifts and supplies their every need."¹⁴⁴ Allison further points to Matt 4:23–5:2 as the lead-in to the Sermon, Jesus' compassion on the multitudes:

Before the crowds hear the Messiah's word they are the object of his compassion and healing. Having done nothing, nothing at all, they are benefitted. So grace comes before task, succor before demand, healing before imperative. The first act of the Messiah is not the imposition of his commandments but the giving of himself. Today's command presupposes yesterday's gift.¹⁴⁵

In principle, Allison's remarks pertain to Matt 18:1–4. But even with all the qualifications built in concerning the preaching of the kingdom as the context of Jesus' radical requirements for his followers, there is nonetheless a set of preconditions to the final stage of the kingdom that are to be taken very seriously. The root of the matter is voiced by Matt 7:21–27: disciples are to do the will of his heavenly Father by hearing *his* words and doing them. Whether one's house survives the eschatological flood waters of judgment

¹⁴⁰ Foster, *Community, Law and Mission* 207.

¹⁴¹ John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (AnBib 71; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976) 113. This background is demonstrated in detail by Marcus, "Kingly Power" 665–68. In brief, see Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 1.758–59.

¹⁴² Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, and particularly David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (SNTSMS 88; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁴³ On which, see Allison, *Studies in Matthew* 43–63. Contra Schnackenburg, who argues for entrance into the present rather than the future kingdom ("Grossein im Gottesreich" 275).

¹⁴⁴ Dale C. Allison, "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *JBL* 106 (1987): 441.

¹⁴⁵ Allison, "Structure" 441. See further Luz, *Theology of Matthew* 46–50.

hinges directly on a “wise” response to these admonitions. In a nutshell, everything can be summed up with the phrase “following Jesus.” In the Gospels, *the* gospel is following him.¹⁴⁶ In this light, the all-important question naturally is: What does it mean to follow Jesus? The answer is: “It means to drop in behind him, to be ready to go to the cross as he did, to write oneself off in terms of any kind of importance, privilege or right, and to spend one’s time only in the service of the needs of others.”¹⁴⁷

VI. FURTHER DISPUTES

While the question of greatness as such is not raised outside the passages we have examined thus far, the issue of comparative status does arise in other texts. Matthew 20:20–28 and Mark 10:35–45 are parallel in most respects. The demands of James and John (or their mother) to occupy the highest positions in the kingdom are set in immediate proximity to the journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be delivered up to death (Matt 20:17–19; Mark 10:32–34). In both Gospels, the juxtaposition of his suffering and the disciples’ quest for glory is palpable.

These two pericopae shed light on what “greatness” meant in the conception of the disciples, or at least two of them: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” These are the positions of highest rank.¹⁴⁸ Davies/Allison submits that the reference is to eschatological rule and places of honor: proximity implies favor, while recognizing Jesus’ destiny and acknowledging great authority on his part.¹⁴⁹ However, the realism of the situation is best captured by Edwards: “How easily worship and discipleship are blended with self-interest; or worse, self-interest is marked as worship and discipleship.”¹⁵⁰ One might say that James and John wanted to report only to Jesus, while all the others would report to them. In commenting on Matthew’s version, Nolland remarks that the mother of James and John anticipates the acquisition of royal rule in Jerusalem in the near future and thus hopes that her sons will be able to play a central role in this rule.¹⁵¹ Likewise in Mark, Lane argues that the brothers regard Jesus as the eschatological Lord who goes to Jerusalem to restore the glory of the fallen throne of David: “The question of rank, involving an inflated understanding of their own position, is best explained in the context of royal

¹⁴⁶ See Luz, *Theology of Matthew* 58–61, 101–16; Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in the Synoptic Gospels* (Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 4; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006); Edmund K. Neufeld, “The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’ from the Synoptics,” *JETS* 51 (2008): 267–96; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 546–65.

¹⁴⁷ Best, *Disciples and Discipleship* 13.

¹⁴⁸ 1 Kings 2:19; Ps 110:1; Zech 6:13 (LXX); Sir 12:12; 1 Esd 4:29; Josephus, *Ant.* 6.11.9 §235; b. *Yoma* 37a.

¹⁴⁹ Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 3.88.

¹⁵⁰ Edwards, *Mark* 322.

¹⁵¹ Nolland, *Matthew* 820.

messiahship.” Lane explains that the request may be for the places of honor at the messianic banquet or for the positions of eminence and authority at the parousia, when Jesus is enthroned as the eschatological judge.¹⁵²

In both accounts, Jesus rebuffs the brothers’ ambition by clarifying (1) that such places of prominence are not his to grant anyway (Matt 20:23; Mark 10:40); and (2) that there is a precondition for reigning in that day. In Matthew, the disciples must drink his own cup of suffering, and in Mark the cup is accompanied by their experience of his baptism. Both are metaphors for servanthood and affliction,¹⁵³ culminating in the cross. That Mark adds baptism to the cup has its own significance: “The baptism of Jesus is his whole existence in the form of a servant, all that is included in his being upon earth ‘not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”¹⁵⁴ Especially fascinating, along this line, is the connection between the request of James and John to sit at Jesus’ right hand and the left and the passion narratives of Matthew and Mark, according to which he is crucified between the two thieves on his right hand and on his left. Allison explains that, on the one hand, there is the image of a glorified Jesus enthroned in Jerusalem, while, on the other, there is the image of Jesus hanging from a cross outside of Jerusalem, with the two criminals on either side. “Bringing the two images together engenders irony, for while the two sons have the first scene in mind, Jesus is contemplating the second.”¹⁵⁵ Jesus does not (necessarily) expect his followers to be crucified in literal terms; rather, in today’s terminology, the point is that of “cruciform existence” with their Lord.¹⁵⁶

Also in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus forwards the negative instance of the “rulers of the Gentiles” and “their great men,” who lord it over them, and the positive exemplar of himself, the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. In their aspirations for greatness, the brothers were imitating the former rather than the latter, and both (along with the others) needed a reminder that servanthood is just that—ministry to others rather than giving orders and luxuriating in accolades. Servants do not “call the shots;” they do as they are told without “murmuring and questioning” (Phil 2:14). France is right to remind us that although Mark 10:45 is a crucial verse for its great soteriological implications, it comes in a context of Jesus as model. It is not the “ransom for many” that

¹⁵² Lane, *Mark* 378–79 (quote from 378).

¹⁵³ For the cup, see Ps 11:6; 75:8; Isa 51:17–23; Jer 25:15–28; 49:12; Lam 4:21; Ezek 23:31–34; Hab 2:16; Zech 12:2. Baptism recalls judgment by water in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 6–8; Exodus 14; Isa 28:2, 17; 29:6; 30:30; Jer 10:13; 46:8–9; 47:2; 51:16; 51:55; Ezek 13:11–14; 26:19; 38:22; Hos 8:7.

¹⁵⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT 34; London: SCM, 1962) 160.

¹⁵⁵ Allison, *Studies in Matthew* 321–32 (quote from 332). The corresponding irony is that in the Gospel passion narratives Jesus’ crucifixion is his elevation to kingship. See Joel Marcus, “Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 73–87.

¹⁵⁶ An idea mainly associated with Pauline soteriology. See, for example, Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); idem, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul’s Spiritual Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

the disciples are to reproduce but the spirit of service and self-sacrifice. “They, too, must serve rather than be served, and it may be that some of them will be called upon . . . to give up their lives. There is no room for quarrels about τίς μείζων.”¹⁵⁷ Yet there is a definite upside to servanthood: “The reason why a servant is the most preeminent position in the kingdom of God is that the sole function of a servant is to give, and giving is the essence of God.”¹⁵⁸

Matthew 23:1–12, in principle, falls under the present rubric. While not a debate as such, Matthew’s recitation of Jesus’ instruction to the Twelve reflects their prior wranglings over greatness. The fact that this teaching takes place during the Passion Week only adds to its relevance. As on previous occasions, he puts a negative example to them, but this time it is not the rulers of the Gentiles but the scribes and Pharisees, the “rulers” of the Jews (cf. John 3:1). They are characterized as overbearing, out for honors, constantly engaged in self-aggrandizement, and demanding titles of tribute. For this reason, the disciples are not to be called “father” or “master,” because they have one Father, who is in heaven, and one master, the Christ. Then comes the familiar: “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (vv. 11–12). If the repetition of this admonition seems redundant or tedious, the role reversal entailed in servanthood is “such a radical challenge to natural human valuation that it needs constant repetition”¹⁵⁹ and “one must work at the practice of lowliness.”¹⁶⁰

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In all three Synoptic Gospels, the question “Who is the greatest?” in association with the arguments about comparative status in the kingdom, apparently occupied a good deal of the disciples’ attention. The greatness in question may be defined as the positions of power and influence (“the right hand and the left”) that are in immediate proximity to Jesus’ own status of exaltation. In other words, greatness, for the disciples, was having everyone else “report” to them, while they gave an account only to the Lord. Because the quest (lust) for such preeminence is essentially idolatrous, for Jesus the issue was one of momentous consequence. While he was fully aware of the weakness and failings of his followers, the fact remains that their propensities toward self-adulation and their ambitions to occupy the high places of the kingdom presented an insurmountable barrier to the servanthood to which they had been called. In Mark 9:33–37 and Luke 9:46–48, the concern about greatness occasioned Jesus to instruct the Twelve by means of a child. In so doing, he admonishes them that those who would be great must become as the least and the servant of all. Similarly, in Luke 22:24–30, the greatest among them must become as the youngest, and the leader must be as one

¹⁵⁷ France, *Mark* 421.

¹⁵⁸ Edwards, *Mark* 326–27.

¹⁵⁹ France, *Matthew* 374.

¹⁶⁰ Luz, *Matthew* 8–20 429.

who waits on tables. Kingdom membership entails nothing less than casting oneself in the role of those who were the least regarded in the culture of ancient Palestine, children and servants.

Such is also the burden of Matt 18:1–4, and the same object lesson of childhood is employed to make the point. In common with Mark and Luke, it is the looming cross that forms the setting of the greatness question and underscores its glaring inappropriateness in such circumstances. The journey to Jerusalem was meant to be one of the disciples emulating Jesus' own confrontation with rejection and death in the capital city, not one of resolving the question "Who is the greatest?" What distinguishes Matthew's version, however, is the prospect of entering or not entering the kingdom in its final manifestation, a decided Matthean motif (5:20; 7:21; 19:23–24). Whereas the Markan and Lukan passages serve as a reminder to the disciples of the humility and spirit of servanthood whereby they initially accepted Jesus' preaching, in Matthew the issue is advanced a stage farther: the fear is that they may not even enter the eschatological phase of God's rule, let alone occupy a position of prominent standing in it, if they persist in their heated debates regarding which of them will be the "honchos" when the kingdom arrives in fullness.

The conclusion or application is that the followers the Christ may start well, but they still may fail to "see God" in the consummated stage of his reign (Matt 5:8). If a formal reason may be assigned as to why the quest for personal greatness precludes one from the kingdom, it is because all such ambition cuts across the very grain of discipleship and servanthood. In the end, the craving to be "something" (Gal 6:3) renders one less than "pure in heart" (Ps 73:1; Matt 5:8), that is, one whose inward person is devoid of idolatry. In a nutshell, the life of self-promotion and self-aggrandizement does not befit the servants of God, because, in the end, it is about them and not about Christ and his reign. His followers are to remember that in spite of their individual achievements, they are but "unprofitable servants." A highly pertinent case in point comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which the apostle commends in highest terms his "son" Timothy to the readers: "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (Phil 2:20–22). Timothy, in other words, was one who preached not himself but Christ as Lord (2 Cor 4:5). As exemplified by Timothy, there is worth, but a worth consisting in ministry to others and an abnegation of one's self-interests and celebrity.