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Research article

A SOCIO-RHETORICAL READING OF THE MATTHEAN BEATITUDES

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ABSTRACT

No biblical text has had greater impact on Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount. Introducing the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' pronouncements commonly known as the beatitudes (cf. Matt. 5:3-12) which establishe the ideology of the teachings which come afterward. This paper examines the Matthean beatitudes using Vernon K. Robbins' socio-rhetorical approach to biblical exegesis which requires that a text be analyzed from five different "textures", namely, the inner texture, the intertexture, the social and cultural texture, the ideological texture and the theological/sacred texture. Robbins' approach assumes that a text can be viewed as a rich tapestry of textures each of which represents meaning in a unique way. The study focuses on inner texture, the intertexture and the social and cultural texture. The study concluded that the study and application of the message of the Matthean beatitudes has the potential of improving Christian discipleship in the 21st century society.

Introductory Background Issues

The Sermon on the Mount is among biblical texts that have had huge influence on Christianity. John R. Stott considers this passage as "the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed."[1] James H. Burtness agrees with Stott and says, "[t]here is no section of the Bible which has been so quoted (by non-Christians as well as Christians), worked over, commented upon, argued about, taken apart and put together, preached and taught, praised and scorned as has the Sermon on the Mount."[2] Scholars have subjected this passage to various exegetical approaches, theological presuppositions, and ethical meanings throughout the history of the Christian Church.[3] Introducing the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' pronouncements commonly known as the beatitudes (cf. Matt. 5:3-12; cf. Luke 6:20–23) which establish the ideology of the teachings which follows.[4] There are nine beatitudes, with the first eight (5:11-10) forming a single unit, while the ninth (5:11-12) is an explanation and summary of the setting for the Matthean audience.

From the early second century the Church has identified the apostle Matthew as the author of this Gospel.[5] G.N. Stanton and D.A. Hagner maintain that this Gospel was written within the religious and political context after 70 AD.[6] Deji Ayegboyin suggests a Palestinian origin is impossible because Matthew was originally written in Greek.[7] A Syrian origin, precisely Antioch, has a wider acceptance. It is widely held that the beatitudes were pronounced on a mountain in Galilee. John Francis Fenlon maintains that they were delivered on Karn Hattin, the Horns of Hattin, a mountain whose name comes from the little village at its northern base and from the two horns which crown its top.[8] Karn Hattin is located

[1] John R. Stott, *Sermon on the Mount* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 5.
[2] James H. Burtness, "Life-Style and Law: Some Reflections on Matthew 5:17," *Di* 14/1 (1975): 13.
[3] Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, "Theological Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount: Making and Old Sermon Relevant for our Time" in *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* Vol. 18 No. 5 (2016): 69-90.
[4] Andreij Kodjak, *A Structural Analysis of the Sermon on the Mount* (Berlin: Mouton dc Gruyter, 1986), 42.
[5] Deji Ayegboyin, *The Synoptics: Introductory Notes on the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Ibadan: Global Estida Publishers, 2015), 87.
[6] G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 124; D. A. Hagner, "The Sitz im Leben of the gospel of Matthew" in DR Bauer and MA Powell (eds.), *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies*, 27-68 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 44-45.
[7] Deji Ayegboyin, *Synoptics*, 92.
[8] John Francis Fenlon, "Mount of Beatitudes" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Retrieved October 15, 2015 from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02369a.htm

in "Galilee in easy distance of Nazareth, Cana, and Mt. Tabor to the southwest, of Tiberias and Lake Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee) to the east, and of Capharnaum to the northeast, in the center, therefore, of much of the ministry of Jesus."[9] Timothy Dale Howell argues that the original audience of the beatitudes is "community network"—consisting primarily of Jewish Christians at its inception, but incorporated Gentile believers over time— which had adequate understanding of the Matthean intention.[10] This community was not isolated but connected to other Jewish Christian communities who shred similar challenges with the Matthean community.[11] This community was persecuted by the Romans for their faith in and allegiance to Christ. As the community followed Jesus, their suffering was viewed as a paradoxical participation in Jesus' salvific ministry. The beatitudes were written to encourage the new community, despite the resistance against its presence. Through this literary piece, the Matthean community would understand its role in representing Jesus in the world.

The beatitudes have been subjected to many approaches of interpretation.[12] The first method, the eschatological approach, considers the beatitudes as gracious pronouncements of God upon people who need a spiritual reversal. This means they serve as a bridge of hope between the present and the reality of the future.[13] In this sense, the apocalyptic themes so predominant during Jesus' time would be another aspect within the eschatological dimension.[14] R. A. Guelich posits that Matthew 5:3-5 shares the eschatological orientation of Isaiah 61:1-3.[15]

The second method is the ethical approach which considers the beatitudes as moral standards used catechetically within the Matthean community.[16] In other words, these sayings are a description of discipleship while the rest of the Sermon

[9] Fenlon, *Mount of Beatitudes.*

[10] Timothy Dale Howell, "Examining the Jewish Origins Employed in the Matthean Beatitudes Through Literary Analysis and Speech Act Theory" (PhD Dissertation submitted to South African Theological Seminary, 2011), 26.

[11] R. Bauckham, "For whom were Gospels Written?" in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 55 (1999): 865-882, 877-882.

[12] Gleaned from Howell, "Examining the Jewish Origins Employed in the Matthean Beatitudes Through Literary Analysis and Speech Act Theory", 2-7.

[13] D. C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 178.

[14] D. Flusser and R. S. Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (4th ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

[15] R. A. Guelich, "The Matthean Beatitudes: 'Entrance-Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings" *JBL* 95 (1973), 415-434.

[16] See H. Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* Translated by SM Gilmour (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1951).

reveals the cost of discipleship. The emphasis the Sermon places on the law and the need for its appropriation through good works demonstrates the concept of discipleship and hence serves as a support for this approach.

The third, the epitome approach, considers the beatitudes as epitomising Jesus' thoughts and theology, based on the Hellenistic philosophers. According to this approach the beatitudes are the essence of Christianity.[17] Luke Timothy Johnson, an advocate of this view, considers the whole Sermon as the epitome of Jesus' teaching and hence the essence of Christianity.[18] Finally, the sapiential approach considers the beatitudes as wisdom offered to the peasant community, which clashed with the values of honour and shame in Mediterranean culture. G. A. Tuttle is of the view that the Sermon on the Mount should be interpreted as a wisdom speech because the wisdom it demonstrates is typical of Israel's wisdom movement.[19]

This study examines the Matthean beatitudes using Vernon K. Robbins' socio-rhetorical approach to biblical exegesis. Robbin's method aims at understanding first-century Palestinian narratives, speeches and discourses and how they relate to the social, cultural, ideological and religious contexts of the first-century Mediterranean world. The socio-rhetorical approach identifies five textures of texts, namely, inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture and sacred texture by which the ancient text may be interpreted.[20] However, the present study focuses on inner texture, the intertexture and the social and cultural texture.

With this introduction, the study now proceeds to consider how each texture may contribute to the interpretation of the beatitudes.

Inner Texture

According to Robbins "Inner textual analysis focuses on words as tools for communication."[21] At this stage the interpreter does not look for the meaning of the passage but for an intimate knowledge of words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text. Inner textural analysis in this study includes repetitive and progressive sub-textures. Repetitive texture occurs when a word or a phrase appears more than once in a unit. In ancient Israel,

[17] Johnson, *"The Sermon on the Mount"*, 654.
[18] Johnson, *"The Sermon on the Mount"*, 654.
[19] G. A. Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount: Its Wisdom Affinities and their Relation to its Structure" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 20(3):213-230.
[20] Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 96.
[21] Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 7.

repetition served many diverse functions in the literary composition of a text. It was a valuable and effective mnemonic device.[22] Repetitive texture emphasizes and calls attention to repeated word, phrase or idea[23] so that they are not overlooked by the reader. The frequency of words in the pericope under consideration, along with the verses they occur in, has been documented in Table 1 below.

The study shall proceed to discuss some of some key words. The first word from the repetitive texture is "blessed" *(makarios)* which appears nine times in the passage. The repetition serves not only to move focus to God's blessing upon his people, but also to tell readers that God's grace precedes his commands. The blessings were hyperbolic as an emphasis on the nature of reversal the messianic kingdom symbolized amid persecution. The Greek adjective *makarios* can and does mean blissful/happy but not in the usual sense of happiness based on (positive) circumstances. In Homer, *makarios "*specifically describes the gods"[24] as being blessed in themselves. The Greeks considered their gods as blessed not on moral grounds but because of their

Table 1: Repetitive Texture

Words/ Phrases	**Occurrences**	**Verses in Matt. 5:3-12**
Blessed	9	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
Kingdom of heaven	2	3, 10
Are	9	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
Righteousness	2	6, 10
Until	2	18 (x2)
Shall	7	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11
They	9	4 (x2), 5, 6(x2), 7, 8, 9, 10
For	10	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (x2), 11
Theirs	2	3, 10
You	3	11(x3)
The	8	3 (x2), 5(x2), 7, 8, 9, 10
Sake	2	10, 11
God	2	8, 9

[22] James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18, 10.

[23] E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 264.

[24] Barclay, "Gospel of Matthew Vol. 1" (Edinburg: The Saint Andrew Press, 1960), 84.

power and dignity.[25] The expression *he makaria* (meaning "Happy Isle") was used to describe Cyprus because it (Cyprus) was believed to be "so lovely, so rich, and so fertile an island that [nobody] would [ever] need to go beyond its coastline to find the perfectly happy life."[26] Thus, Cyprus was described as blessed because it was regarded as possessing within itself all that is needed for perfect happiness. *Makarios*, therefore, refers to "that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes in life."[27] It is the type of joy that no one or no circumstance can take away from the Christian (John 16:22). Unlike happiness which is dependent on prevailing circumstances, joy does not depend on life chances and changes. A change in fortune, the collapse of health, the failure of a business plan, the disappointment of an ambition, a change in weather can take happiness away but joy remains the same no matter the situation. The blessedness promised in the beatitudes is a triumphant shout of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can take away.

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" (*ten basileian ton ouranon*) appears twice in the beatitudes. Among the Synoptics, only Matthew uses this phraseology.[28] Scholars have argued that Matthew used "kingdom of heaven" rather than "the kingdom of God" because he was writing to Jews who revered the name of God so much that, they hardly vocalized it.[29] Considering their use in the Synoptics, it is clear that these two phraseologies carry the same idea.[30] From its root meaning, the term "kingdom" encompasses both concrete ideas such as realm, territory, domain, or people over whom a king reigns and abstract ideas such as sovereign authority, royal power or dominion. When applied to God, "kingdom" comprises "God's overall reign in the universe, his present spiritual reign in his people, and his future messianic reign on earth."[31] For G.E. Ladd the kingdom is "God's rule which [humans] can and must receive in the present; but God's rule will also

[25] Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* Vol. 1 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2009), 33.
[26] Barclay, "Gospel of Matthew Vol. 1", 84.
[27] Barclay, "Gospel of Matthew Vol. 1", 84.
[28] Matthew uses this expression 34 times.
[29] Ayegboyin, *Synoptics*, 101; W. T. Purkiser (ed.), *Exploring our Christian Faith* (Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1960), 520.
[30] Denzil R. Miller, *The Kingdom and the Power: The Kingdom of God: A Pentecostal Interpretation* (Missouri: AIA Publications, 1946), 4 (pdf). Compare Matt. 4:17 with Mark 1:14-15; Matt. 5:3 with Luke 6:20; Matt. 11:11 with Luke 7:28; see also Ayegboyin, *Synoptics*, 101.
[31] Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 1347.

be eschatologically manifested in the future."[32]

Matthew's uses "kingdom of heaven" at the beginning and ending of the beatitudes to form an *inclusio* (Matt. 5:3, 10). In these verses, the use of *auton* ("theirs"), a genitive of possession and in the emphatic position, point to the beginning of the eschatological fulfillment in Jesus' ministry.[33] In addition, the present tense verb *estin* ("is") was used in both verses, as opposed to the future tense in the other beatitudes linking them together. By the use of this structure Matthew was drawing attention to the importance of the kingdom of heaven: Blessedness comes from nowhere but the kingdom. He also used this structure to contend for the certainty of kingdom "rule" arriving with Jesus, understanding that the full demonstration of the kingdom on earth (spatial) still waited for consummation.[34] The expression "kingdom of heaven" combines the prophetic understanding (cf. Dan. 2:44; 4:26 and 7:27) with the present perception of Jesus as kingdom mediator. Jesus, in announcing the kingdom gospel, was alluding to the fact that his kingdom originated not from the earth but from God ("heaven"). Since the kingdom was to be realized in Jesus' earthly presence, the beatitudes affirm that the constituents of this kingdom were those who attained and understood this kingdom exclusively through Jesus.

The next repetitive word is righteousness (*dikaiosune*) which appears seven times in Matthew's Gospel— five appearing in the Sermon on the Mount of which two appear in the beatitudes (Matt. 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). Righteousness has at least three aspects: legal, moral and social. Legal righteousness is justification, a right relationship with God. The moral aspect of righteousness refers to character and conduct which pleases God. Social righteousness refers efforts towards the liberation of oppressed people as well as the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honor in home and family affairs.

The numerous allusions to Isaiah (see intertexture below) make it prudent to examine the Isaiahic usage of the term "righteousness." For the prophet Isaiah, "righteousness" was a descriptive attribute of God rather than humanity. Isaiah describes God and his actions as righteous (cf. Isa.

[32] George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing, 1953), 138.
[33] D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary 33a: Matthew 1-13* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 92.
[34] Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1986), 129.

41:2; 42:21; 45:8, 13, 21; 46:12-13; 51:8; 56:1; 60:17, 21; 61:3). Isaiah continually emphasizes that divine justice would be the distinctive mark of the future kingdom. Matthew understood that the righteousness Jesus offered was inseparable from the kingdom he proclaimed.

The righteousness of God was experienced through the restored covenant and substantiated in obedience to his will. Hence, one sees righteousness in the beatitudes as both justice (5:3-6) and conduct (5:7-10), demonstrating the kingdom presence. Thus, Christians are committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to a righteous God.

Progressive Texture

In Robbins' socio-rhetorical interpretation, progressive texture refers to the sequences or progressions of words and phrases which usually emerge out of a text. It is the sequence of thought in a literary piece. Table 2 outlines the progression of major topics in the beatitudes.

Table 2: Progressive Texture

Verse	Major Topics
3	Poverty in spirit Kingdom of Heaven
4	mournful Comfort
5	Meekness the Land
6	Hunger and thirst Filled
7	Merciful Mercy
8	Purity in heart God
9	Peacemaker Sons of God
10	Persecution Kingdom of Heaven

The beatitudes were not presented haphazardly but in a definite progressive and logical order.[35] The narrational discourse of the pericope shows an obvious progression in the first three beatitudes, as each build on the other both from the perspective of the general conditions for entering the kingdom and characteristics of those who have entered. The first beatitude expresses the notions of contrition and humility. "The poor in spirit" refers to "the *utter spiritual destitution*, the consciousness of which precedes the entrance into the kingdom of God, and which cannot be relieved by one's own efforts, but only by the free mercy of God."[36] The person who is "poor in spirit" is aware of his/her spiritual bankruptcy before God. Being poor in spirit leads to mournfulness as one acknowledges his/her nothingness before God and this condition also progresses into that of meekness in the third beatitude, meekness being "essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others."[37] It is the result of a true understanding of the nature of self and its great ego-centricity.

Having used the first three beatitudes to draw attention to human need—poor in spirit, mourning because of one's sinfulness, meekness which leads one to complete surrender to God—Jesus' thought logically progresses to the great provision for the needs of the first three needs: those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness…shall be filled."[38] John MacArthur aptly captures the progress of thought as follows:

> Jesus' call to spiritual hunger and thirst also follows logically in the progression of the beatitudes. The first three are essentially negative commands to forsake evil things that are barriers to the kingdom. In poverty of spirit we turn away from self-seeking; in mourning we turn away from self-satisfaction; and in meekness we turn away from self-serving.
>
> The first three beatitudes are also costly and painful. Becoming poor in spirit involves death to self. Mourning over sin involves facing up to our sinfulness. Becoming meek involves surrendering our power to God's control.
>
> The fourth beatitude is more positive and is a consequence of the other three. When we put aside self, sin, and power and turn to the Lord, we are given a great desire for righteousness. The more we put aside what we have, the more we long for what God has.[39]

[35] This paragraph was gleaned from Isaac Boaheng, "Teaching Everyone to be like Christ: Lessons from the Matthean Beatitudes," *The Christian Sentinel: A Quarterly Magazine of the Methodist Church Ghana.* Vol. 29. No. 1 (2020): 29-31, 34.

[36] Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* Vol. 1 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson's Publishers, 2009), 36. Italics original.

[37] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 68.

[38] Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 74.

[39] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 179,180.

The thought progresses to present the general fruits/results of the first four conditions, namely, being merciful, being pure in heart, being peacemakers and being persecution on account of righteousness. Logically, as one recognizes his/her need of righteousness and vile sinfulness, he/she becomes receptive of God's gracious mercy. God's mercy flows to such a person because he/she becomes hungry and thirsty for righteousness. A. W. Pink points out clearly that:

> The place occupied by [the fifth] Beatitude in the series furnishes a sure key to its interpretation. The first four may be regarded as describing the *initial* exercises of heart in one who has been awakened by the Spirit, whereas the next four treat of the *subsequent* fruits. In the preceding verse the soul is seen hungering and thirsting after Christ, and then filled by Him, whereas here we are shown the first effect and evidence of this.[40]

The second half of the beatitudes (the last four) turns from divine-human relationship to humn-human relationship. MacArthur maintains that "The first four beatitudes deal entirely with inner principles, principles of the heart and mind. They are concerned with the way we see ourselves before God. The last four are outward manifestations of those attitudes."[41] The progression in thought continues in that as a person who is filled with God's righteousness (v. 6) identifies with sinful ones in their need and, hence shows mercy (v. 7) by showing compassion for the needy (for example, by helping relief the poor of their plight), the person now possesses a pure heart towards others and hence becomes a genuine peacemaker. The blessed are to rejoice even in times of persecution because of the reward they have in heaven.

Intertexture

Two types of intertexture stand out in this pericope. There is an Oral Scribal Intertexture where Jesus recontextualizes Isaiahanic imargeries. A study of the Old Testament allusions, as used by Matthew within the pericope, shows verbal clues that are reflected Jewish and temple notions. With Matthew's allusions to Isaiah in the beatitudes, he interpreted the Old Testament motif of a "faithful remnant" as those who had repented and followed Jesus. Isaianic themes describing the Matthean community include Isaiah 61 and 62 (see table 3 below).

Table 3: Mathew's use of Isaiah in the beatidues	
Matthew	Isaiah
Poor in spirit	Good news will be given to poor (61:1)
Mournful	Broken-hearted will be comforted (61:1-2)
Meek	Shame and disgrace replaced with land promise (61:7)
Righteousness cravings	Planted like oaks of righteousness (61:3)

[40] A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, edited by Terry Kulakowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950), 20.
[41] MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7*, 187.

Merciful	Nations will see righteousness and seek for it (62:1-2, 12)
Purity of heart	Preparation to see Savior come to his people (62:11)
Peacemakers	Desire for Jerusalem's prosperity means peace (62:1-9)
Persecuted	Rebuilding, restoring, and renewing (61:4)
Rejoice	God has provided the desired righteousness (61:10)
Give Glory	Acknowledge divine blessing on God's people (61:9)

The expression "kingdom of heaven" appealed to a foundational Jewish metanarrative. Both the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants was Israel's guarantee of a kingdom created by God (cf. 2 Sam 7:12-16). Therefore, when the third beatitude promises to the meek, an inheritance of the land (cf. Matt. 5:5), the land of Israel was alluded to. There is also a remarkable correlation between the beatitudes and the apocryphal book of Sirach: "Blessed is anyone who has not sinned in speech... Blessed is anyone whose conscience does not reproach him (Sir. 14.1). More so, the beatitudes are a very frequent literary figure within Judaism, occurring frequently in the Old Testament, particularly as an opening blessing or congratulation: Blessed is anyone who rejects the advice of the wicked (Psalm 1:1, and frequently in the Psalm 2:12; 32:1, 2; 40:4; 41:1; 84:4; 106:3; 119:1, 2; 128:1). The first and second beatitudes relates to the tabernacle in Exodus 33. The reference to the "poor in spirit" and "those that mourn" echoes the story of the Israelites entering the tent of the tabernacle humbly and in a mournful state.[42] They voluntarily removed their ornaments and glorious apparel (Ex. 33:4–6) to dramatically symbolize their state of repentance and mourning.[43] The first beatitude, therefore, indirectly promises redemption from the fall and an ascent "from the earthly and lowly thoughts to the spiritual mountain of higher contemplation."[44] The first beatitude also echoes Psalm 69:32-33 which links the "poor" with people who seek God in the Temple. Furthermore, some texts from the Dead Sea Scroll (DSS) correspond to the Matthean thought presented in the composition of the beatitudes. Fragment 2-3 2:1-7 reads:

> Blessed is he who speaks truth with a pure heart and who does not slander with his tongue. Blessed are those who cling to her statutes and who do not cling to the ways of perversity. Blessed are those who rejoice in her and who do not spread themselves in the ways of folly. Blessed is he who

[42] Betz cited in John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 49.
[43] Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 49.
[44] Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 49.

> seeks her with pure hands and who does not go after her with a deceitful heart.
>
> Blessed the man who has attained Wisdom and who walks in the Law of the Most High and applies his heart to her ways, who cherishes her lessons and ever rejoices in her corrections, but who does not repel Her in the pain of [his] misfortune[s](?) and in bad times does not abandon Her, who does not forget Her [in days of] terror and in the humility of his soul does not reproach [Her]. Thus, on Her he meditates always and, in his misfortune, he ponders on [the Law(?) during all] his existence on Her [he reflects(?)] And puts Her(?)] before his eyes in order not to walk in the ways of the wicked (?) folly/impiety(?).[45]

Comparing 4Q525 and Matthew 5:3-10, Puech concludes that the authors in Palestine during 200 BC—100 AD knew the literary rules for a composition of the genre of a beatitude.[46] The present researcher maintains that 4Q525 does not have a direct link to Matthew. Yet, within Second Temple Judaism there existed a "beatitudes genre" that both Matthew and Luke employed. Furthermore, Matthew possibly used language, similar to initiation rituals for new members to a community, with the concepts of reward and seeing God. It was within this context that Matthew employed the genre with a direct application to Jesus' eschatological message for the new community.

Social and Cultural Texture

Social and cultural texture refers to a situation whereby a text interacts with society and culture by sharing in the general social and cultural attitudes, norms and modes of interaction that are known by everyone in a society, and by establishing itself in relationship with the dominant cultural system as either sharing, rejecting or transforming those attitudes, values and dispositions.[47] Another aspect of social and cultural texture is the final cultural category which focuses on the cultural location of a reader, writer, or the text.[48] One category, counter-culture, is considered in this study. Counter-culture arises from a dominant culture and/or subculture and yet rejects the explicit and mutable characteristics of the dominant or subculture rhetoric to which it responds. For example, Jesus' pronouncement about the meek was the direct opposite to the prevailing world view. In Jesus' time one would think that "meek" people get nowhere because everybody ignores them or else rides roughshod over them and tramples them underfoot. The

[45] E. Puech, "The Collection of Beatitudes in Hebrew and in Greek" in *Early Christianity in Context, Monuments and Documents,* eds. F. Manns and E. Alliata (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1993), 354-355.

[46] Puech, "The Collection of Beatitudes in Hebrew and in Greek," 362.

[47] Vernon K. Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," [Accessed online, on 31/10/2020, at http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/index.cfm]

[48] Robbins, *Exploring,* 86.

godless may boast and throw their weight about; yet, real possession eludes their grasp. The meek, on the other hand, may be deprived and disenfranchised by other; yet, because they know what it is to live and reign with Christ, they can enjoy and even "possess" the earth, which belongs to Christ. Also, a pronouncement like "Blessed [happy] are they that mourn" is an aphorism that is at complete variance with the logic of the world. To talk of persecution as the outcome of righteous living was another strange concept to the Jewish audience, which considered prosperity and peace as signs of the favor of God and looked upon persecution and conflict as signs of his displeasure. To them, accomplishing the will of God and living for righteousness would bring favor rather than persecution. Clearly, the markarisms do not address the "general human condition" or the popular virtues in the first-century Greco-Roman world. The situation envisioned in the markarisms represents the social disgrace which disciples have suffered on account of the Lord, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' view, true honor and esteem are determined and bestowed by God, very publicly, for all to see. And the things that God considers truly honorable and worthy of praise are almost always the opposite of what human beings of any culture think. The pronouncements in the beatitudes, therefore, came as a counter to the dominant culture of Jesus' time and brought a great shock to Jesus' audience because they were at variance with the logic of the world.

Another aspect of the social and cultural texture worth-discussing includes common social and cultural topics, particularly the issue of honor (public reputation) and shame. In the New Testament, the expression of honor and shame is primarily linked with issues of social justice and hospitality. In the first-century world, honor had a social value like a commodity on the market and as such it was an object of continuous competition. Maintaining one's pride and honor was therefore of prime importance. Like today's world, first-century Jews were keen on protecting their honor and fighting to retrieve it if it has been lost. It was a community of such a cultural frame of reference that Jesus pronounced blessings on those who were in shameful positions. As a word of encouragement, Jesus employs the analogy of the Old Testament prophets who suffered public humiliation for their righteous message. Jesus counters shame with honor by bestowing honor on those who have suffered the loss of honor for his sake. Jerome H. Neyrey rightly observes that the meek who have presumably suffered some loss, especially family land, are made heirs

of the land/earth.[49] The "merciful" who probably have experienced some affronts and yet remained calm without retaliating, are promised divine mercy.[50] The "peacemakers", that is, "those who have either challenged others (5:23-24) or been challenged in turn (5:38-42), are given the honor as the children of God."[51] The "persecuted" have suffered "public reproach, censure, and loss of respect and reputation" and are now promised divine vindication.[52] The honor Jesus promises serves to reverse the social shame which his followers have suffered.

Conclusion

This brief socio-rhetorical reading of the Matthean beatitudes has brought points to the following conclusions.[53] First the beatitudes describe what every Christian ought to be like. There is no distinction as "the religious and the laity, exceptional Christians and ordinary Christians, the one who makes a vocation of the Christian life and the [one] who is engaged in secular affairs."[54] The beatitudes are a complete whole and cannot be divided. They progress from one to another. Just as the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit which Paul lists is to ripen in every Christian character, so the nine-fold beatitudes which Christ speaks describe the ideal for every believer. However, the full manifestation of all these characteristics is to be seen when one is perfected. As it is now, there will be variations in their manifestation. The beatitudes constitute an attitude that makes believers different from unbelievers. Speaking from a counter-cultural perspective, Jesus emphasizes that the character of a Christian is completely distinct from that admired by the world. For example, the Christian admires the one who is "poor in spirit" but the world despises such a person. The godless may boast and throw their weight about but the Christian cherishes meekness. This emphasis on "non-comformism" is seen throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and climaxed in the statement "Do not be like them" (Matt. 6:8). Finally, the study and application of the message of the Matthean beatitudes has the potential of improving Christian discipleship in the 21st century society.

[49] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 188.
[50] Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 188.
[51] Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 188.
[52] Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 188.
[53] Gleaned from Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 33-41.
[54] Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

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