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The Relation between Christ, Believers and Authorities in Matthew

Abstract.

One can find not too many passages in Matthew, which deal with the relation between Christ, his followers and the authorities. When Christ or the believers came into contact with the authorities, usually they ended up persecuted, mistreated, jailed or executed. We will examine the encounter with Herod, John the Baptist, the first and second centurion, Pharisees, Herodians, Pilate, chief priests, Simon from Cyrene and Joseph of Arimathea. There are very rare instances when a representative of the authorities does not abuse of his status and acts as a normal human being. Jesus prepares his disciples for the bad treatment to come and assures them of His help. During the persecution they have to react as the sons of the heavenly Father, they may rejoice in the suffering, knowing that the power of the authorities is finite, and the word of God is endless.

Key words: Christ, believers, authorities, Matthew.

1. Introduction

The term authority (*exousia*) occurs mainly in the New Testament and it is used at least in four different ways. Firstly, authority is the freedom to decide or a right to act without any hindrance. All such authority begins with God and comes from God, for there is no authority except from God (Rom 13:1). Believers have the right to become children of God (John 1:12), and they have freedom with respect to the law (1 Co 8:9). While authority is valueless without the power to make it effective, we can make a fine distinction between the two concepts. This first understanding of authority, then is distinct from power and refers primarily to a prerogative. Secondly, the concept of authority refers to the power, ability, or capability to complete an action. Jesus was given the authority to forgive sins (Matt 9:6–8) and to drive out spirits (Mark 6:7). Jesus gave seventy(-two) disciples the authority to trample on snakes and scorpions (Luke 10:19). Simon sought power to grant the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:19). Thirdly, the word “authori-

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ty” is used with reference to delegated authority in the form of a warrant, license, or authorization to perform. Jesus was asked by whose authorization he taught (Matt 21:23). He was granted authority for his ministry from God the Father (John 10:18). Saul was sent to Damascus to persecute Christians by warrant of the priests (Acts 26:12). God gave the apostles license to build up the church (2 Co 10:8). Fourthly, by a natural extension of meaning, *exousia* sometimes denotes the sphere in which authority is exercised. God has established spheres of authority in the world, such as civil government. Jesus was handed over to the official power of the governor (Luke 20:20). When Pilate learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction or authority, the governor sent him to Herod (Luke 23:7). Rulers and kings have their spheres of influence (Ro 13:1), as does Satan (Mk 1:13), but Christ has been placed above all realms of authority (Eph 1:21). More often *exousia* refers to the power employed by rulers or others in high positions by virtue of their office, such as civil magistrates (Tit 3:1). This use of authority indicates a social relation between at least two individuals where one is the ruler. The subordinate in the relationship accepts the ruler’s orders, not by external constraint but out of the conviction that the ruler is entitled to give orders and that it is the duty of the subject to obey and recognize the authenticity of the ruler’s position and orders.

From a theological perspective the fourth use of authority is most significant and partly it is the topic of our research. The question of authority is a fundamental issue facing every person, especially the believer. Its significance cannot be overestimated. Every person has an authority in life that he or she submits to as a subordinate, not by constraint but by conviction. Furthermore, God has created human beings to live under his authority.

How, then, does God, from whom the authority of Christ, of Christ-believers and of the civil authorities comes, exercise his authority over creation and his creatures? The testimony of Scripture is that God has established three fundamental spheres of authority within which he delegates authority to individuals. These spheres are civil government, the home, and the church. The believer is obliged to obey those holding authority in those realms. Citizens are to submit to the governing authorities (1 Pe 2:13–14). Children are to obey parents (Eph 6:1–2). Believers were to honour spiritual authorities such as apostles who demanded compliance on the basis of their commission from the Lord. According to Luke, however, when the governing authorities commanded Peter to cease preaching, he disobeyed (Acts 5:29).²

In the New Testament *exousia* appears 108 times, most frequently in Revelation, Luke and 1 Corinthians. It is used in a secular sense, meaning the power to give orders

² Walter A. ELWELL (ed.): *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997. S. v. “Authorities”, by Sam Hamstra, Jr.

(Matt 8:9 par. Luke 7:8; Luke 19:17; 20:20), in a concrete sense, meaning jurisdiction (Luke 23:7), and in the plural meaning officials, authorities (Luke 12:11; Tit 3:1).³

Roman governors are called *exousiai* and described as God's servants to punish evildoers and encourage law-abiding citizens (Rom 13:1–6). Christ-believers are to regard the 'powers that be' as God-ordained (John 19:11), and dutifully subject themselves to civil authority (Matt 22:17–21) so far as is compatible with obedience to God's direct commands (Acts 4:19; 5:9).⁴

In Matthew's gospel we read about Christ, who received his authority from God, about Christ-believers, who received authority from their Master, and civil authorities, whose authority comes from the Creator, but often is perverted through individual interests. These authorities are in conflict, especially the civic authorities when confronting divine authority.

1. Christ and Herod

In the beginning of the gospel it is related that Jesus was born during the time of King Herod (Matt 2:1). The king was an Idumaeon, known as 'Herod the Great'. He was a puppet king under the Romans and was given the title 'King of the Jews' in 40 BC. This title and mainly his vanity positioned him on the side of those opposing Jesus. The wise men were looking for the king of the Jews, and this search, which did not identify the title with the person of Herod, enraged and provoked the king. Jesus' royalty is set in contrast to Herod's kingship over the Jews (Luke on broader canvas contrasts Caesar Augustus, who claimed the title 'Saviour' and 'Lord', with the 'Saviour, who is Christ the Lord' (Lk 2:1–11).) The title is equally misunderstood by Herod who felt threatened by it, and later on by Pilate who felt bewildered by it (Matt 27:11–14).⁵ The Magi – who might be difficult to call Christians, although they worshipped Christ – are also in conflict with the authorities represented by Herod, as the king wanted to use them as spies, but they were warned in dream and returned to their homeland avoiding Herod (Matt 2:7–8.12).

Joseph has a revelation by an angel of the Lord in his dream for the second time in this gospel, and he is instructed to take the child and migrate in Egypt, a world power in that time. He has to flee with his family in order to escape from the fury of Herod,

³ Colin BROWN (ed.): *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* vol. 2. The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1992. S. v. 'Exousia' by Otto Betz. 606–611.

⁴ J. D. DOUGLAS (ed.): *New Bible Dictionary* (second edition). Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. S. v. 'authority' by J. I. Packer, 108–109.

⁵ D. GUTHRIE, J. A. MOTYER, A. M. STIBBS, D. J. WISEMAN (eds.): *New Bible Commentary*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992. 818–819.

who wants to kill Jesus. And indeed, it follows the slaughter of the infant boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhoods. King Herod treats Jesus as his rival, who has to be put to death in order to secure his own kingship (2:16). After Herod the Great's death (who reigned between 37–4 B.C.) the Lord's angel appears to Joseph for the third time and instructs him this time to return just before the land of Israel, because that is safe now for them. Joseph obeys the revelation and command, but when he found out that Archelaus took over after Herod in Judea, he is afraid to go back there. Archelaus was the son of Herod the Great, who ruled over Judea and Samaria for ten years (4 B.C. – A.D. 6). He was unusual cruel and tyrannical (what pattern was he following?) and so was deposed. Judea then became a Roman province, administered by prefects appointed by the emperor. Joseph is afraid after returning from the imposed exile to Judea, but he does not take decisions by himself, as it is directed again by the angel, this time to the district of Galilee (2:22), the northern part of Palestine in Jesus' day. This is how Jesus arrives to Nazareth, and that becomes his hometown (2:23). This was the first major conflict of Jesus with the authorities, although he was just a child and mainly suffered from the consequences of Herod's oppressive tyranny.

2. Christ and religious authorities, the Pharisees, Herodians

Matthew also relates an event, when the Pharisees send their disciples together with the Herodians to trap Jesus in his words. The verb entrap derives from a word for a trap or snare used in hunting. The Pharisees decide to confront Jesus with a delicate political question.⁶ The Pharisees were ardent nationalists, opposed to Roman rule, while the hated Herodians, as their name indicates, supported the Roman rule of the Herods. Now, however, the Pharisees enlisted the help of the Herodians to trap Jesus in his words. After trying to put him off guard with flattery, they sprang their main question: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If he said "It is not", the Herodians would report him to the Roman governor and he would be executed for treason. If he said "Yes", the Pharisees would denounce him to the people as disloyal to his nation. The main question is a political one: how do you relate to the authorities? Jesus gave an unexpected answer (22:15–22), but he still ended on the cross in obedience to his Father.

3. Christ and Pilate

Until now we saw that when Christ or his believers encountered the authorities, usually followed humiliation, persecution, imprisonment and even execution. At the end of the gospel Jesus is face to face again with the authorities. It is sad that the religious authori-

⁶ Richard B. GARDNER: *Matthew. Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, Waterloo, Ontario, 1991. 326.

ties handed him over to the political authorities to be put to death (27:1–2). The Sanhedrin had been deprived by the Roman government of the right to carry out capital punishment, except in the case of a foreigner, who invaded the sacred precincts of the temple. So Jesus had to be handed over to Pilate for execution. The working day of a Roman official began at daylight. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36, whose official residence was in Caesarea⁷ on the Mediterranean coast. When he came to Jerusalem, he stayed in the magnificent palace built by Herod the Great, located west and a little south of the temple area. Matthew uses the word “Praetorium” to indicate this palace in 27:27, and it was that the Roman trial of Jesus took place. Jesus was interrogated by Pilate, the governor, according to the Roman principle “audietur et altera pars”, but except acknowledging Pilate’s question he did not answer any of the charges brought against him by the chief priests and the elders. He knew that his righteousness is established not by earthly authorities, but by the divine truth (27:11–14). Pilate realizes soon enough that Jesus does not deserve to be executed; therefore he tries to escape him by his custom to release a prisoner at the Feast chosen by the crowd. His attempt to release Jesus produces an interesting question: “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” (27:17). According to some manuscripts Barabbas was called Jesus as well.

Pilate found himself in a trap, when the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and execute Jesus. Pilate’s wife tries to warn him not to interfere with the condemnation of that “innocent (dikaios) man”, and she refers to her dream in which she suffered because of Jesus. But Pilate takes a political decision, because he has to calm down the crowd and after washing his hands, declaring himself innocent (athoos), he had Jesus flogged and handed over to be crucified (27:19–26). A pagan woman warns Pilate on the ground of her dream, while Israel, who was proud to know the Scriptures, rejects Christ.⁸ After meeting the authorities, Jesus’ ordeal continues on a lower level, when follows his mocking by the soldiers.

4. Christ and the chief priests, Pharisees

In Matthew’s gospel there is another episode on the authorities. The chief priests and the Pharisees want to be sure that nothing will happen around the tomb where Jesus’ body lies, so they ask Pilate to make secure the tomb until the third day. Pilate grants them a guard of Roman soldiers. He still wants to avoid any uproar. The Roman soldiers witness the earthquake and the appearance of the angel of the Lord, who rolls

⁷ In 1961 archaeologists working at Caesarea unearthed a stone contemporary with Pilate and inscribed with his name.

⁸ Fritz RIENECKER: *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*. R. Brockhaus Verlag, Wuppertal, 8. Auflage, 1975. 357.

away the stone from the tomb and announce the resurrection of Jesus.⁹ Some of the guards go to the city and report to the chief priests what had happened. The chief priests consult the elders, and then bribe the soldiers with a large sum of money, and make them to lie about the events.¹⁰ In the same time they are promised to be safe if the governor will hear the report. The authorities are again interested in being in good relations with the representatives of the Jews and do not investigate in depth the truth (27:62–28:15).

5. Christ and the first Roman centurion

There is one event related in Matthew when Jesus has to deal with the authorities and it happens not in unpleasant circumstances. This is the story about the Roman centurion, who is seeking help from Jesus. In this case he does not approach Jesus from the position of power, but as a person who cares about his servant, and would like to help him. His humble approach makes the difference. The centurion was a Roman military officer in charge of one hundred soldiers. He was a Gentile, while Grundmann speculates he was a Syrian; Davies-Allison that he was a Roman.¹¹ In Luke's account (Lk 7,1–5) Jewish elders and friends of the centurion came to Jesus on his behalf, but Matthew does not mention these intermediaries. The centurion was the representative of the military power, which enforced the political authority. It was a leading member of the oppressing Roman system,¹² but Jesus saw in him the person who was worried because of his servant. In this case Jesus does not lecture about his mistake in being on the wrong side, but listens to his intercession and heals his servant (Matt 8:5–13). This was a pleasant and fruitful encounter with one representative of the authorities.

6. Christ and the second centurion

During the crucifixion of Jesus, he meets with another representative of the authorities, the centurion who is in charge with the execution. We don't know if he interacted with

⁹ R. T. FRANCE: *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. Paternoster Press, Guernsey, Channel Island, Reprint 1997. 139.

¹⁰ R. T. FRANCE: *Matthew. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reprint 1992. 409–410.

¹¹ Donald A. HAGNER: *Matthew 1–13. Word Biblical Commentary*. Volume 33A. Word Book Publisher, Dallas, Texas, 1993. 203.

¹² Joachim GNILKA: *Das Matthäusevangelium. Erster Teil. Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*. Sonderausgabe. Herder, Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 2000. 300–301.

Jesus on the cross or not, but we do have his testimony recorded by Matthew: "Surely he was the Son of God" (27:54). It cannot be determined whether the centurion made a fully Christian confession, of whether he was only acknowledging that, since the gods had so obviously acted to vindicate this judicial victim, Jesus must be one especially favoured by them. But in view of the ridicule voiced by the Jews (v. 40), it seems probable that Matthew intended the former. If he did, that was a second satisfying encounter with a representative of the authorities, and he was also a Roman centurion, as the first one.

7. Christ followers and authorities

The beginning of Jesus' suffering somehow foreshadows what is expected in the life of his followers. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus designates as blessed those who are persecuted because of righteousness, who are insulted, mistreated because of him (5:10–12). The relationship of the Christ-believers with God does not cause them to withdraw from society, but on the contrary, they are in the thick of it. They have to be peacemakers, but no one will thank for their efforts, rather they will be opposed, slandered, insulted and persecuted.¹³ Jesus continues the teaching of his followers, telling them: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). This lesson is equally applicable to civic and religious authorities, or simple citizens. This paradigm may characterize their conduct when they will come in contact with the oppressive system led by authorities.

In this trend has to be mentioned the Golden Rule: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (7:12). Jesus refers again to the prophets, and the hint has to be taken seriously concerning the authorities as well. But Jesus doesn't ask his disciples to be underwitted. He is realist when he tries to prepare them for what is coming upon them. Jesus sends them as sheep among wolves; therefore they have to be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. Not just wise, and not just blameless, but both in the same time. The Master warns them to be on their guard against men,¹⁴ and foretells them that will be handed over to local councils, they will be flogged, and they will be cited before governors and kings as witnesses. Mainly this will be their relationship to the authorities, but they don't have to despair, in contrary, they have to rejoice and be glad. They don't have to worry how to defend themselves, because at that time they will be granted by the Holy Spirit what to say (10:16–20). Everyone will hate them, but Jesus reassures them, that

¹³ John R. W. STOTT: *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Christian Counter-Culture. BST, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993. 54.

¹⁴ Ivor H. JONES: *The Gospel of Matthew*. *Epworth Commentaries*. Epworth Press, London, 1994. 66–67.

those who will stand firm will be saved. Jesus gives them even an advice about what they have to do when they will be persecuted in one place: they have to flee to another place (10:22–23). In the same thread Matthew mentions in the fifth great discourse of his gospel that Jesus warned the apostles that they will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and they will be hated by all nations because of him (24:9). Their duty under these circumstances is to preach the gospel of his kingdom as a testimony.

The believers live in the earthly kingdom, where authorities are opposing and oppressing them, but they are citizens of the heavenly kingdom as well. When Jesus teaches them to pray, three of their requests have to be about the arrival of God's kingdom, the accomplishment of his will not just in heaven, but on this earth as well, and deliverance from the evil one. The original text and some translations allow us to understand "evil" in general, and then in the sixth wish we may hear the bid for deliverance from the ill will of political and religious authorities.

8. John the Baptist and authorities

When discussing succinctly the relation between believers and authorities we may refer to John the Baptist too. John was a relative of Jesus and they had a special relationship. Matt 4:12 mentions briefly that John the Baptist was put in prison. He had strong disagreements with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and he criticized them harshly (3,7–10), but the main reason of his imprisonment was his confrontation with the authorities, more specifically with Herod Antipas, the tetrarch. A "tetrarch" was originally a ruler of the fourth part of a region, but later the term was used to indicate any prince or governor less in rank as a king or an ethnarch.¹⁵ Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea (4 B.C.–A.D. 39). John the Baptist has not tolerated the tetrarch's relationship with Herodias, and he even expressed his displeasure regarding this matter. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. First she married her uncle, Herod Philip, who lived in Rome. While a guest in their home, Herod Antipas persuaded Herodias to leave her husband for him. Marriage to one's brother's wife, while the brother was still living, was forbidden by the Mosaic Law (Lev 18:16), and John the Baptist broached him for this. Since this conflict arose between them, Herod Antipas put him in prison and tried to kill him, but refrained himself because the people respected John as prophet. Herod Antipas' birthday and the dance of Herodias' daughter together with Herodias advice lead to the execution of John the Baptist (Matt 14:1–12). In the Gospel of Matthew we saw that the believers encountered resistance from the authorities for their

¹⁵ William HENDRIKSEN: *The Gospel of Matthew. New Testament Commentary*. The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1989. 585.

belief, and often ended up by being persecuted or even executed. This aspect becomes even clearer in the Acts.

9. Simon from Cyrene and authorities

On the way to Golgotha he meets another person, Simon from Cyrene.¹⁶ Simon was not a Christian at that time (Mark 15:21 mentions that he is the father of Alexander and Rufus, but Matthew and Luke drops out as meaningless to their audience, who did not know those men as Mark's audience apparently did),¹⁷ but he encounters Jesus and experiences the meeting with the authorities. Men condemned to death were usually forced to carry a beam of the cross, often weighing 14 or 18 kilos, to the place of crucifixion. Jesus started out by carrying this, but he had been so weakened by flogging that Simon was forced into service (Matt 27:32).

10. Joseph of Arimathea and authorities

There is a Christian, namely Joseph of Arimathea, who has to come into contact with the authorities in order to take care of Jesus' body. According to the Markan and Lukan parallels, he was a member of the council of the Sanhedrin and would thus have been well apprised of Jesus's fate.¹⁸ He is a wealthy person, and therefore his contact with Pilate is also a unique one. Joseph asks for Jesus' body from Pilate, and his request is granted. He is able due to his influence to organize a proper burial for Jesus. If he would not be rich and would not have influence, he would not be taken seriously by the authorities (27:57–60).

11. Conclusions

We may conclude that there are not too many passages in Matthew which deal with the relation between Christ, his followers and the authorities. When Christ or the believers came into contact with the authorities, usually they ended up persecuted, mistreated, jailed or executed. There are very rare instances when a representative of the authorities does not abuse of his status and acts as a normal human being. Jesus prepares his disci-

¹⁶ Cyrene is an important city of Lybia in North Africa, which had a large Jewish population. Simon was probably a Jew who was in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

¹⁷ Robert H. GUNDRY: *Matthew. A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Second edition, 1994. 568.

¹⁸ Donald A. HAGNER: *Matthew 14–28. Word Biblical Commentary*, volume 33B. Word Book Publisher, Dallas, Texas, 1995. 858.

ples for the ill treatment to come and assures them of his help. They have to react during the persecution as the sons of the heavenly Father, they may rejoice in the suffering, knowing that the power of the authorities is finite, and the word of God is endless.

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