Leaven

Volume 19
Issue 2 *The Gospel of Matthew*

Article 6

1-1-2011

Matthew 11.28-30: Jesus' Invitation to (Rest)ored Creation

Nathan Bills
nbills80@gmail.com

Matthew 11.28–30: Jesus' Invitation to (Rest)ored Creation

NATHAN BILLS

The congregation in which I was raised believed firmly that preaching belonged at the center of our weekly assembly times. And, of course, every homily, regardless of length or topic, *had* to conclude with a call to come forward in response to the gospel, "as together we stand and sing." The instinct to sing a hymn that reflected the nature of the gospel invitation usually resulted in a select group of songs sung regularly and repeatedly at this moment in worship service. One standard "song of invitation"—one that aimed at convicted hearers among us—captures the essence of our tradition in its chorus:

> Ye that labor and are heavy laden,
> Lean upon your dear Lord's breast;
> Ye that labor and are heavy laden
> Come, and I will give you rest.[1]

The entire song sets to music Jesus' poetic summons in Matthew 11.28–30:

> Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.[2]

His invitation seems naturally to lend itself to the soteriological impulses that made the hymn such a regular in my church's liturgy. Here the gentle Lord with outstretched hands offers redemptive respite to the wayward sinner who draws near.

Scholars have focused a significant amount of attention on these verses as well, but for an altogether different reason. Many allege that Matthew 11.28–30 makes a provocative christological claim based on an intertextual allusion to the intertestamental wisdom book of Jesus Ben Sirach 51.23–27:[3]

> Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity.

1. Mary B. C. Slade, "Hark the Gentle Voice" in *Songs of Faith and Praise*, ed. A. Howard (West Monroe, LA: Howard, 1994).
2. All scripture quotations in this essay are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.
3. Sirach is also known as the Wisdom of Ben Sirach/Sira or by its Latin name Ecclesiasticus. A Hebrew scribe by the name of Jesus ben Sira composed it in the second century BCE. It is among the intertestamental writings included in the Apocrapha.

When placed in parallel, similarities between the two passages are readily apparent. It has been argued that in Matthew Jesus speaks in the place of personified Lady Wisdom.[4] However, Jesus extends *his* yoke, not the yoke of Wisdom (as in Sirach). Though some scholars have posited that Matthew means to identify Jesus with Wisdom in a very intimate way, Matthew places the accent in Jesus' invitation elsewhere. Rather, Matthew seems to understand Jesus' offer of rest against the backdrop of Israel's eschatological hopes for a restored creation. Matthew's adaptation of Sirach 51.23–27 permits him to bring together a collage of interrelated themes that together point to Jesus as the embodiment of Israel's salvific hopes. In sum, Matthew 11.28–30 summons the reader to recognize Jesus as inaugurating God's new creation through his authoritative, revelatory and sapiential invitation to rest.

SIRACH IN THE BACKGROUND OF MATTHEW 11.28–30

Matthew 11–12 catalogues a variety of responses to Jesus' identity and ministry (11.2–3). Among the reactions, the theme of rejection emerges more forcefully than any other response.[5] In addition, an eschatological and messianic expectation orients the conversation leading up to 11.28–30. Jesus answers John's christological question ("Are you the one to come?") by identifying activity associated with God's eschatological deliverance (11.5). In his subsequent address to the crowd, Jesus singles out John as the eschatological forerunner. Jesus then chides the people for missing the eschatological significance of the present moment before thanking his Father for enabling his disciples to understand.

Matthew 11.28–30 is certainly not an explicit quotation of Sirach, but the similarities are palpable. I list below the relevant text from Sirach 51 beside Matthew 11.28–30 with the parallel ideas underlined and parallel words in bold.

Sirach 51.23–27

23 Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. 24 Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you (lit. "your souls") endure such great thirst? 25 I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. 26 Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. 27 See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity (lit. "rest").

Matthew 11.28–30

28 Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Key verbal links such as "yoke," "labor," "your souls" and "find rest" increase the volume of the echo beyond mere thematic parallels.[6] The contexts of the two passages equally encourage intertextual correspondence: both teachers invite to themselves those who are enduring undesirable circumstances to accept a yoke, most readily understood in context as a yoke involving instruction and/or discipleship. Moreover, Jesus' description of his yoke

4. Throughout this essay "Wisdom" will refer to the hypostasized divine figure/attribute, and "wisdom" will denote the sapiential genre. "Wisdom christology" will denote the idea that NT authors present the person of Christ in the categories traditionally reserved for the personified/hypostasized Lady Wisdom. Finally, a "Sirach-reading" of Matthew refers to a reading that posits an intentional echo of Sirach in the background of Matthew 11.28–30. For a readable summary of history and development of Wisdom within the wisdom literature, see Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 3–116, especially his table on 114–15.

5. Jesus twice disapproves of "this generation" for their intransigence (Matt 11.16; 12.45), delivers "woes" upon three Galilean cities (11.20–24) and engages the Pharisees in a series of disputes (12.1–37) that ends in their condemnation (12.34).

6. I borrow the language of volume from Richard Hays, "'Who Has Believed Our Message?' Paul's Reading of Isaiah," in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 34–6.

as light seems relatable to Sirach's designation of his labor as little.[7] Both teachers hold up their lives as examples to follow and promise rest as the reward. At the very least, the connections indicate that Matthew is familiar with Sirach 51.[8]

Another text in Sirach also contains a loud echo of very similar themes. In Sirach 6.18–31 the sage offers an invitation to come to Wisdom: "for when you cultivate her you will *toil* but little" (v. 19). Upon bearing Wisdom's yoke, the follower will discover her yoke transformed into a beautiful garment, a joyous occasion associated with "*find[ing]* the *rest* she gives" (vv. 28–31). Perhaps most telling, though, the notion of shouldering a "yoke" in order to find "rest" occurs only in Sirach 6, 51, and Matthew 11—surely not coincidental![9] Given all the other verbal and thematic linkages, the addition of this striking parallel should caution against dismissing the idea that Matthew's readers would have heard an intentional and strong echo of Sirach. In sum, whatever one makes of the meaning of Sirach 51 (and 6) in the background of Matthew 11.28–30, the evidence for its presence in the text is impressive. The cumulative case insists upon a reading attuned to Matthew's use of Sirach.

Noting Differences and Filling in Gaps

The similarities do not override the significant differences between the two texts. Matthew has not haphazardly adopted this logion, nor, do I believe, was he unaware of these differences. Rather, as R. T. France aptly summarizes the issue: "This is a deliberate reangling of a familiar text to say something wholly new about *Jesus*, which is in continuity but also and more importantly in contrast with what Sirach said about Wisdom."[10] I briefly note three differences that indicate that Matthew is doing something distinctive with this echo from Sirach.

The Speaker

First, in Sirach 51 (and 6) the *sage* is the one who issues the invitation of Wisdom's yoke and rest. In contrast, Matthew's Jesus offers *his* yoke as "teacher" whose relationship with the Father is unique (v. 27). What connection, then, does Matthew want to make to Jesus by echoing Sirach's Wisdom?

Sirach evinces a desire to more closely associate Torah with Wisdom—a sapientializing of Torah.[11] As Daniel Harrington observes, "Ben Sira's basic and most important theological insight is that the highest form of wisdom is to be found in the Torah . . . "[12] In a hymn praising Wisdom, Wisdom issues her own invitation that is immediately followed by the sage's word, "All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us" (Sir 24.23).[13]

The theme of Torah interpretation is certainly at play in Matthew 11.28–30. Jesus describes his target audience as those who are "carrying heavy burdens" (*pephortismenoi*). Matthew's Jesus elsewhere uses the nominal form "burden" (*phortion*) to describe Pharisaic interpretation of Torah (Matt 23.4), the only other occurrence of this root in Matthew outside of our passage. Secondly, the immediately following context relates a controversy over proper interpretation of Torah in regard to Sabbath.[14] Finally, a Torah-sensitive interpretation of Matthew 11.28–30 is supported by connotations of Torah brought to mind by the word "yoke," a word elsewhere used in conjunction with Torah (Jer 2.20; 5.5; 2 Baruch 41.3; cf. Acts 15.10).

All of this suggests that Matthew means to call to mind the interplay between Wisdom and Torah that

7. Richard Hays, "Jesus as Wisdom" (manuscript, Duke Divinity School, 2009), 3.
8. Other passages make clear that Matthew is in dialogue with Sirach, e.g., Matt 6.7/Sir 5.2; 7.14; Matt 6.14f//Sir 28.1f. See Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 143–45, for other possible parallels.
9. The Greek word *zygon*, translated by the NRSV as "yoke" in both Matthew 11 and Sirach 51, does not occur in Sirach 6, but *kloion*, "collar" (v. 24), and *desmoi*, "yoke" (v. 30), no doubt convey the same idea as the translators of the latter phrase indicate.
10. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 447.
11. On this theme, see Gerald Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study of the* Sapientializing *of the Old Testament* (New York: de Gruyter, 1980).
12. Daniel Harrington, *Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem: A Biblical Guide to Living Wisely* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2005), 7.
13. Also see Sirach 19.20: "The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord, and in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law."
14. That Matthew wishes his reader to closely connect 11.28–30 with the following pericope is indicated by his transitional phrase "at that time" and the parallel ideas of "rest" with "Sabbath."

already exists in Sirach, and implicitly pointing out Jesus' superiority to both. The touchstone of Wisdom is no longer Torah. For Matthew, Jesus represents the embodiment of Torah's *wise* interpretation and application. The conventional understanding of Torah and (dependent) insight into a wisely ordered world (à la Lady Wisdom) is "reconfigured" in and by Jesus.[15] The wise person is the one who responds to Torah through the invitation, teaching and discipleship (i.e., "yoke") of Jesus.

Jeremiah 6.16 in Matthew 11.29

The phrase "I will give you rest for your souls" (Matt 11.29d), though closely paralleled in Sirach 51 and 6, is found verbatim in Jeremiah 6.16. In Jeremiah 6 the prophet proclaims judgment because of the people's refusal to heed the invitation of God: "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (Jer 6.16a–d). The response from the people is sharp and decisive: "But they said, 'We will not walk in it'" (Jer 6.16e). God wastes no time in relating the disaster that will befall the people "because they have not given heed to my words; and as for my teaching (literally *torah*), they have rejected it" (Jer 6.19).

Lena Lybæk contends that this allusion to Jeremiah implies that Jesus is offering here not just an individual call to discipleship, but God's repeated call to the nation of Israel to repent in light of coming judgment.[16] Thus, this quotation from Jeremiah deepens the significance of heeding the call of Jesus. Submission to Jesus' yoke is a better guide than either the yoke of Wisdom or Torah, though it is not incompatible with either. Failure to heed his call is tantamount to rejecting Israel's God.

"Gentle and Humble in Heart"

The phrase "for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11.29c) has no clear parallel in Sirach, and seems even antithetical to Wisdom's proud speech elsewhere (e.g., Sir 24.1; Prov 1.20ff.; 8).[17] Jon Laansma has made a strong case, based on the correlation of the "meekness" with the Davidic king (cf. Matt 21.5), that Jesus' self identification as "gentle and humble in heart" is more than just an ingratiating image to persuade would-be disciples, but a deliberate allusion to his role as the messianic Son of David.[18] Matthew is adding another theme into an already dense three verses.

MATTHEW 11.28–30 AND ESCHATOLOGICAL REST

If the overall context of Matthew 11 is eschatological and messianic, as argued above, it should not surprise us that elements within Jesus' invitation reflect an eschatological and messianic orientation as well. An eschatological emphasis bears particularly on how Matthew may have perceived the "rest" that Jesus was offering. The Old Testament manifests a prominent tradition of rest that was integrated into Israel's redemptive eschatological visions. Very early in their history, God promised to give the children of Israel rest from warfare and sojourning in the land of their inheritance as part of the covenant blessing.[19] The vicissitudes of Israel's precarious existence in the land continued to make rest a potent theme, especially in contexts highlighting the promises made to David and his lineage (2 Sam 7.11; 1 Kings 5.4; 8.56).[20] The tabernacle/temple, the locus of God's presence, is described in various poetic passages as God's resting

15. Richard Hays, "The Gospel of Matthew: Reconfigured Torah," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 61 (2005): passim.
16. Lena Lybæk, *New and Old in Matthew 11–13: Normativity in the Development of Three Theological Themes* (FRLANT 198; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 156–57.
17. Graham Stanton, "Matthew 11.28–30: Comfortable Words?" in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 369.
18. Jon Laansma, *"I Will Give You Rest," The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3–4* (WUNT 2/98; Tübigen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 192–93.
19. Deuteronomy 3.20; 12.10; 25.19; cf. 28.65; Josh 1.13, 15; 23.1. The actualization of the rest in most texts is contextually tied to Israel's covenantal obedience.
20. 1 Chronicles 22.18; 23.25; With regard to other kings, see 2 Chronicles 14.1; 14.5ff; 15.15. Laansma, *Rest Motif*, 25–33, points out that Deuteronomy 12, 2 Samuel 7, and 1 Kings 8 all focus on the temple as a promise tied to Israel's rest.

place.[21] The prophet Isaiah in particular made use of the theme of rest, often adapting it to his cosmological and eschatological expectations (alongside the themes of temple, land and Davidic Messiah).[22] Rest also receives attention in the wisdom literature, and it is especially Sirach who brings the rest motif into the orbit of personified Wisdom, temple and Israel's hopes (Sir 6.28; 24.7–11; 36.18; 47.13; 51.17).[23]

Are there pointers in Matthew11.28–30 that suggest it is this rest tradition that Matthew was drawing upon? Beside the general eschatological context of Matthew 11–12, Laansma points out a few overlapping themes in the Matthean context which regularly appear in tandem with the rest tradition in the Old Testament. The promise of rest as part of the Davidic covenant figures powerfully here, and it needs to be noted that the language of sonship (2 Sam 7) is also present in Matthew 11.25–27. Matthew has earlier alluded to Isaiah 61 (Matt 11.4–5) and to Isaiah 14 (Matt 11.23), both texts that relate to the rest tradition. It is also worthy of note that Jesus invites comparison between himself and the temple in Matthew 12.6.[24] The eschatological motifs of Davidic Messiah, rest and temple each in their own way saturate the context in and around Matthew 11.28–30.

Surely most significant, though, the pericope following Jesus' invitation revolves around interpretation of Sabbath. The phrase in Matthew 12.1 "at that time" (cf. Matt 11.23) ties the two texts more closely together than the chapter break admits.[25] Sabbath language and imagery are integral to Israel's traditions of creation and exodus, and Israel's eschatological hopes flowed out of these events.[26] Donald Carson is likely not too far off the mark when he suggests that Matthew saw in Jesus' invitation "the gospel rest to which the Sabbath had always pointed and was now dawning."[27]

The collage of motifs associated with the Old Testament rest tradition in Matthew 11–12, coupled with Matthew's placement of 11.28–30 as an intentional prelude to the Sabbath controversies of chapter 12, relates Jesus and his offer of rest to Israel's eschatological hopes. Moreover, the fact that Matthew likely edited this logion to include a reference to the "gentle" Davidic Messiah greatly strengthens this conclusion. The Old Testament vision of rest is a broad motif, and Matthew employs it to bring together "specific and repeated promises made by God to his people, promises which looked toward an ultimate fulfillment in some future, cosmic, redemptive work."[28] For Matthew, Jesus summons those who would participate in Israel's eschatological and soteriological hopes to take up his yoke. Only by following in the train of the one who authoritatively *offers* that rest could the hopes of Israel be realized.

Invitation to (Rest)ored Creation

In an oft-quoted description of Matthew 11.28–30, Hans Betz compares the passage to "a vessel which itself has no content, but which stands ready to be filled."[29] Betz overstates the case; but I would argue that what Betz sees as a passage with vague words and images, Matthew views as an opportunity to unite a number of

21. Psalm 132.8, 14 (see context of Davidic promise); Psalm 95.11 (if read in light of Psalm 132.14, could be describing the temple); Exodus 15.17.

22. Isaiah 11.10; 14.3; 28.12; 32.18; 63.14; 66.1. See Laansma, *Rest Motif*, 58–61. He also notes the presence of weariness and humility in the contexts of several of these verses (especially chapters 14; 66).

23. Furthermore, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, expands the language of rest to other parallel contexts not explicitly containing the Hebrew word rest *(mnwḥh):* Deuteronomy 5.3; Isaiah 13.20—14.7; 25.10; 32.17; Ezekiel 34.14–24; Micah 4.4.

24. Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel* (JSNTSup 139; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 81.

25. Ibid., 144–45. Donald Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 98, goes further and states that the connection is chronological.

26. It is true that in the Old Testament the rest tradition and Sabbath were distinct concepts and not *explicitly* combined, that is, Sabbath imagery is not employed to describe Israel's goal of rest in the land (however, cf. Isa 61.1ff; 66.23). On this see Laansma, *Rest Motif*, 61–76.

27. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath," 75.

28. Laansma, *Rest Motif*, 248.

29. Hans Betz, "The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt 11:28–30)," *JBL* 86 (1967): 10.

important narrative themes and leaves clues so that the reader can make connections. Thus, the accumulation of motifs—wisdom, Torah, judgment and Israel's eschatological hopes—testifies to the Gospel writer's literary creativity and exegetical brilliance.

I have already explored how Matthew's location of the Sirach echo here leads the reader to compare Jesus' revelation with the Torah. There may be another, perhaps more foundational, reason Matthew alludes to wisdom. Some scholars have noted that Matthew invites his audience to read his Gospel as an account of "new creation." Indeed, in his opening line, Matthew begins "An account of the genealogy (literally *genesis*) of Jesus Christ . . . " which Davies and Allison argue functions as a title for the Gospel and points to the dawn of new creation.[30]

It would take another study to evaluate the merits of Matthew's interest in new creation. What is intriguing, however, is what Matthew 11.28–30 might yield if one approaches it with heightened sensitivity to creational themes. As we have already discussed, the strong eschatological overtones of Jesus' invitation evoke the coming renewed creation inaugurated by Jesus' ministry. In addition, Jesus' discussion of coming judgment (11.22–24), and his prayer to the "Lord of heaven and earth" preface Matthew 11.28–30 with creational categories. Finally, I would note that Matthew's desire to connect 11.28–30 to the subsequent Sabbath controversies heightens an awareness of how Jesus summons relates to creation.[31]

In summary, I am tentatively proposing that Matthew finds the creational connotations of Wisdom conducive to his presentation of Jesus as the inaugurator of God's new creation agenda. Matthew has cast Jesus' call in the framework of Israel's new creation hopes, and he has drawn on Sirach's Wisdom text (and theology) because the affinities were supple and broad. Jesus is not Wisdom Incarnate, but his word does enable one to live in rhythm with God's new world. Jesus' invitation calls his hearers to a yoke of discipleship that learns from his authoritative and wise reinterpretation of Torah. Bearing this yoke will result in a life lived "with the grain" of the eschatological restored creation. Matthew believes that Jesus' life, death and resurrection form the ordering framework for this new creation (1.1); and this Jesus embodies and so can offer the salvific rest Israel had so long awaited. That gentle voice calls still today. It is the voice of (rest)ored creation.

NATHAN BILLS IS A THIRD YEAR THD STUDENT AT DUKE UNIVERSITY AND HAS ACCEPTED A TEACHING POSITION AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY.

30. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According o Saint Matthew: Matthew 1–7* (ICC; Edinburgh: T and T Clark), 150–54. See also Grant Macaskill, *Revealed Wisdom and Inaugurated Eschatology in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (JSJSup 115; Boston: Brill, 2007), 115ff.

31. It is interesting to note that Matthew's only other use of "meek" is in 5.5 where Jesus says "the meek will inherit the earth."