'They did to him whatever they pleased': The exercise of political power within Matthew's narrative

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ABSTRACT

To read Matthew's Gospel within the global context is to read this narrative *vis-à-vis* the urgent challenges facing the global community. One such challenge concerns the exercise of political power within the public arena. Throughout his narrative Matthew paints a vivid portrait of the political power brokers of Jesus' world and the unsavoury methods that they use to achieve their goals. He also offers graphic depictions of political power as wielded by those in authority. This study examines Matthew's narrative portrait of the first-century authorities, Roman and Jewish, who exercised power in Palestine and beyond. Part one depicts these authorities and their methods of exercising political power. Part two assesses the relative effectiveness of such uses of power in Matthew's depiction. Part three points toward Matthew's contrasting portrait of positive leadership patterns. Part four assesses Matthew's narrative rhetoric as a tool for fruitful reflection on the use of political power.

INTRODUCTION

To read the Gospel of Matthew within the global context is to read Matthew's narrative against the backdrop of the urgent issues and challenges that face the global community as a whole as well as individual nations. One such challenge concerns the exercise of political power within the public arena and the honesty and integrity with which such power is exercised. Frequently such honesty and integrity become casualties of political expedience and the overweening drive to gain and retain power at all costs. Stories of lavish lifestyles, corruption, election fraud, assassination of rival politicians, torture and abuse of those who represent a political threat, repression of political opponents and oppression of the powerless fill our television screens, our airwaves and our newspapers with dismal frequency. Recent geopolitical flash points, such as Myanmar, Kenya, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Gaza and Georgia, are merely current illustrations of an ongoing and global reality. Furthermore, the ongoing American 'war against terror' – which has included such dubious features as 'extraordinary rendition' to foreign prisons, the US detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay and 'enhanced interrogation techniques' (read 'water boarding' for one prominent example) – brings the exercise of political power into our own national life daily as a moral issue facing all those of us who are citizens of the USA.

The Gospel writer Matthew lived in a world little different from our own in this regard. In the course of his story about Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew also paints a vivid portrait of the political power brokers of Jesus' world and the unsavoury, cynical and often brutal methods that they use to achieve their goals. From beginning (2:1–23) to end (28:11–15), Matthew's narrative offers pointed and graphic depictions of political power as it is wielded by those in authority and as it impacts the lives of those who live and die within its domain. Accordingly, to read Matthew's Gospel with a focus on the exercise of political power is to discover a world astonishingly similar to the 21st century world that we inhabit.

This study will examine Matthew's narrative portrait of the first-century political leaders, both Roman and Jewish, who exercised power in the public arena of Palestine and the wider Roman Empire. Part one of the article will examine the Roman and Jewish leaders within Matthew's narrative and the methods they employ to gain, retain and exercise their political power. Part two will assess the effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness of such uses of power, as Matthew portrays this through the rhetoric of his overall narrative. Part three will offer brief pointers toward Matthew's contrasting portrait of positive leadership patterns as reflected in the ministry of Jesus. A brief conclusion will assess Matthew's overall narrative rhetoric as a tool for fruitful reflection on the use of political power within our 21st century global community.

RULERS, GREAT ONES AND VINEYARD TENANTS: A MATTHEAN PORTRAIT OF POLITICAL POWER

On all counts, Matthew's Gospel is a deeply political document. Not only is its central and prominent agenda the proclamation of the 'kingdom of heaven'/'kingdom of God' (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν/τοῦ θεοῦ), a factor which in itself establishes the thoroughly political character of Matthew's message,[1] But in addition, Matthew's narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is intricately interwoven from beginning to end with the realities and the structures of political power, both Roman and Jewish, in place within first-century Palestine. Matthew has barely begun his narrative before he recounts in vivid fashion (2:1–23) the interface between the birth of Jesus Messiah (1:1, 16, 17, 18) and the political power structures in Jerusalem (2:1–23; Weaver 1996:182–187). Throughout Matthew's narrative the life of Jesus is profoundly shaped by ongoing interaction with the political powers of the day, whether Roman[2] or

1. Thus the following βασιλεία references throughout Matthew referring variously to the realm of God: 3:2; 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 13, 33; 7:21; 8:11, 12; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 12:28; 13:11, 19, 24, 31, 33, 38, 41, 43, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19, 28; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23, 24; 20:1, 21; 21:31, 43; 22:2; 23:13; 24:14; 25:1, 34; 26:29. Note also the Matthean references to earthly 'kingdoms': 4:8; 12:25, 26; 24:7.

2.Thus, for example, 8:5–13; 14:1–12; 27:11–37.

Jewish.[3] The penultimate incident of Matthew's Gospel (28:11–15) is one that pointedly highlights the political response of the Jewish leadership to the resurrection of Jesus and the ongoing impact of that political response from the time of Jesus on into the world of Matthew's own church (Weaver 2005:122–124).

The political currents that run through Matthew's narrative are, on the one hand, Jewish in character, corresponding both individually and collectively to the various Jewish parties and leaders identified throughout the Gospel: Pharisees,[4] Sadducees,[5] elders (of the people),[6] chief priests and high priest,[7] scribes (of the people)[8] and Herodians.[9] By all accounts within Matthew's Gospel these are people and groups vested with significant authority within the Jewish community. Jesus himself acknowledges this authority as he speaks to them and to others. In the imagery of one of Jesus' allegorical parables (21:33–46), the chief priests and Pharisees recognise themselves as the 'tenants'[10] (i.e. leaders) to whom the 'landowner'[11]/'owner of the vineyard'[12] (i.e. God) has entrusted the 'vineyard'[13] (i.e. the people of Israel). The imagery of Israel as the 'vineyard' of God is well known within the Jewish community, as reflected in the prophecy of Isaiah 5:1–7. (*cf.* also other Matthean parables of Jesus focused on the imagery of the 'vineyard' [20:1, 2, 4. 7, 8; 21:28]). Jesus likewise announces to his disciples and the Jerusalem crowds gathered in the temple (23:2–3a): 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it ...'.[14] The authority of these leaders also reaches well beyond the Jewish community. They are the biblical scholars to whom Herod the king appeals successfully for information concerning the birth of the Messiah (2:4–6). They are likewise the Jewish community leaders who have the political standing not only to gain audience with Pilate, the Roman governor (27:62), but also, by the same token, to turn prisoners over to Pilate for trial within the Roman jurisdiction (27:1–2). Much of Matthew's narrative focuses on the interchange between Jesus and these political leaders of the Jewish community.

But there are other political currents running through Matthew's narrative as well. These currents are Roman in character, and they correspond to the levels and structures of the Roman Empire visible and active within the 'occupied territory' of first-century Palestine (Carter 2001:9–53). The Roman authorities within Matthew's narrative create a vast hierarchy of power that rules in imperial fashion over the entire Mediterranean world, Palestine included. As Matthew tells the story, this hierarchy includes the Roman emperor,[15] client kings ruling Judea and Galilee on behalf of Rome,[16] the Roman governor of Palestine,[17] Roman military officers such as centurions,[18] and the rank and file of Roman soldiers,[19] organised into legions of 6 000,[20] cohorts of 600,[21] and centuria of 100 (*cf.* 8:5, 13; 27:54; Weaver 2005:107–114).[22] In speaking to his disciples, Jesus identifies this hierarchy of Roman imperial power as 'the rulers of the Gentiles' (οἱ ἄρχον τεσ τῶν ἐθνῶν: 20:25b) and 'their great ones' (οἱ μεγάλοι: 20:25c). Jesus implicitly acknowledges the authority of the emperor as he challenges the Pharisees (22:21b), 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's ...'[23] While much of Matthew's narrative situates Jesus in intramural interaction with the Jewish community, it is Jesus' extramural interaction with the Roman imperial powers that both sets the stage for Matthew's narrative (2:1–23) and drives it inexorably toward its conclusion (27:1–2, 11–37).

Clearly there are significant social differences between the Jewish community portrayed in Matthew's Gospel, with its religious parties and temple functionaries, and the Roman Empire, with its political/military hierarchy extending from the emperor down to the common foot soldier. There is likewise a vast power differential between the Jewish and Roman communities of Matthew's Gospel, the inherent differential between the occupying power and the occupied people. Within Matthew's Gospel this power differential is reflected most prominently in the unhindered prerogative of the Roman imperial forces to engage in military 'search and destroy' missions in the face of political threats (2:1–23), to employ capital punishment as a routine sanction against its subject peoples (20:18–19; 27:1–2, 11–37) and to quash political uprisings with massive military force (*cf.* 21:33–46; 22:1–7; 24:1–2).

But what is perhaps most striking about Matthew's portrayal of these two highly distinct communities are the commonalities that their leaders exhibit as they exercise political power within their respective domains. While not all political strategies are reflected equally in both communities according to Matthew's narrative, there are far greater commonalities than differences in their respective political initiatives.

Lavish lifestyles

Surely one of the most ubiquitous symbols of political power is the lavish life style that frequently accompanies and displays the wealth of the powerful. On this front the political leaders of Matthew's narrative, whether Roman or Jewish, do not disappoint. While Matthew's depictions are spare by comparison with his Markan sources,[24] the images are nevertheless pointed and vivid. One indicator of lavish life style is dress. As Matthew indicates, those who live in 'royal palaces' (οἱ οἴκοι τῶν βασιλέων: 11:8) likewise dress themselves in 'soft robes' (τὰ μαλακα:11:8a/b) of rich colours[25] and wear 'crowns'

3. See, for example, Jesus' constant interactions with the Jewish authorities throughout the Gospel. But note in specific such texts as the following: 12:9–14; 16:21–23; 20:17–19; 21:33–46; 23:1–39.

4. Thus οἱ Φαρισαῖοι: 3:7; 5:20; 9:11, 14, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1, 12; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 19:3; 21:45; 22:15, 34, 41; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29; 27:62.

5. Thus οἱ Σαδδουκαῖοι: 3:7; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 22:23, 34.

6. Thus οἱ πρεσβύτεροι [τοῦ λαοῦ]: 15:2; 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57, 59; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12.

7. Thus ὁ ἀρχιερεύς/οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς: 2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15, 23, 45; 26:3, 14, 47, 51, 57, 58, 59, 62, 63, 65; 27:1, 3, 6, 12, 20, 41, 62; 28:11.

8. Thus οἱ γραμματεῖς [τοῦ λαοῦ]: 2:4; 5:20; 7:29; 8:19; 9:3; 12:38; 15:1; 16:21; 17:10; 20:18; 21:15; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 26:3, 57; 27:41.

9. Thus Ηρῳδιανοῖ: 22:16.

10. Thus οἱ γεωργοί: 21:33, 34, 35, 38, 40.

11. Thus ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης: 21:33.

12. Thus ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος: 21:40.

13. Thus ὁ ἀμπελών: 21:33, 39, 40, 41.

14. All translations reflect the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

15. Thus ὁ καῖσαρ: 22:17, 21.

16. Thus ὁ βασιλεύς: 2:1, 3, 9; 14:9; *cf.* 10:18; 11:8; ὁ τετράρχης: 14:1.

17. Thus ὁ ἡγεμών: 27:2, 11, 14, 15, 21, 23, 27; 28:14; *cf.* 10:18.

18. Thus ὁ ἑκατόνταρχος: 8:5, 13; 27:54.

19. Thus ὁ στρατιώτης: 8:9 27:27; 28:12; *cf.* 2:16; 14:10.

20. Thus ὁ λεγεών: 26:53.

21. Thus ἡ σπείρα: 27:27.

22. Strikingly, however, the most visible face of the Roman Empire within the world of Matthew's Gospel is that of the Jewish 'tax collectors' (5:46; 9:9, 10, 11, 12, 13; 10:3; 11:19; 18:17; 21:31, 32; *cf.* 17:25–26; 22:15–22), who collaborate with the Roman overlords as they collect Roman taxes from their Jewish compatriots.

23. *cf.* 17:25, where Jesus asks Peter, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?'

24. *cf.*, for example, Matthew 14:1–12 with Mark 6:14–29.

25. Thus the 'scarlet robe' of Matthew 27:28. Clearly, in this context, for the soldiers to dress Jesus in a 'scarlet robe' is to dress him in the attire of a 'king', a symbolic mockery made indisputable by the addition of the 'crown of thorns' (27:29a), the 'reed' sceptre (27:29b) and the acclamation, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' (27:29c). While kings in fact wear purple (thus Mk 15:17, 20), Matthew has exchanged the

(στέφανος: 27:29) denoting their royalty. In order to join in the festivities of a royal wedding celebration it is necessary to wear an appropriately lavish 'wedding robe' (ἔνδυμα γάμου: 22:11, 12). The Jewish leaders of Matthew's Gospel, while they do not wear royal attire, nevertheless distinguish themselves extravagantly in the pious dress of their own religious community as they 'make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long' (23:5b).

But lavish lifestyle goes far beyond matters of dress. Royal banquets – whether for weddings (22:1–14) or for birthday celebrations (14:1–12) – are likewise lavish events, with formal invitations,[26] a roomful of guests reclining at the table,[27] a menu of choice meats such as 'oxen' and 'fat calves'(22:4),[28] and fine dancing to entertain the king and his guests (14:6). Such royal banquets can also be the occasion for extravagant and conspicuous gift-giving to honour and award those in favour with the king. For her 'pleasing' dance in front of Herod the tetrarch and his guests (14:6), Herod rewards the daughter of Herodias, 'promising her on oath' – in the presence of his guests (14:9) – 'to grant her whatever she might ask' (14:7).[29] The Jewish leaders may not be on the invited guest list for royal birthday parties or royal wedding banquets, but within their own community they are not to be outdone when it comes to conspicuous celebration. In Jesus' words (23:6), 'The scribes and Pharisees love to have the place of honour (τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν) at banquets'. The motif of lavish living and conspicuous celebration clearly connects the political leaders of Matthew's Gospel, Roman and Jewish alike, within a common lifestyle of privilege.

'I say to one, "Go"': The power of command

No doubt the most basic and symbolic aspect of political power is the prerogative of political leaders to accomplish their goals by commanding others to carry out their decrees. The iconic image of the king on the throne issuing commands for his subjects to fulfil has been the stuff of folk tales and mythology for thousands of years of human society. Such power of command, whether exercised by kings or by other political leaders, is in fact the stuff of lived experience for people in all kinds of societies and social structures. Matthew's narrative, as a portrayal of the social community of the eastern Mediterranean world in the first century, depicts the exercise of power of command in ways characteristic to that world and that historical moment in time.

Within Matthew's narrative it is the Roman leaders and their proxies who exercise power of command in straightforward and uncomplicated fashion. From the top to the bottom of the Roman hierarchy political leaders or their agents simply issue commands that must be obeyed. Herod the king (2:1–23) has authority to 'call'[30] people of prominence into his presence – including the local intelligentsia (2:4a: 'all the chief priests and scribes of the people') and foreign dignitaries (2:7a: the wise men) – and to interrogate them[31] in order to acquire crucial information (2:4b–6; 2:7b, 16c). By the same token Herod likewise has the authority to 'send' [32] people out to do his bidding. The wise men 'set out' for Bethlehem (2:9) when Herod 'sends' them (2:8); and Herod's henchmen carry out the gruesome task that he 'sends' them to do (2:16). In similar fashion Herod the tetrarch (14:1–12) has straightforward authority to 'command' that the head of John the Baptist be given to Herodias' daughter (κελεύω: 14:9c) and to 'send' and have John beheaded in the prison (ἀποστέλλω: 14:10). Pilate the Roman governor (27:1–2, 11–27) exercises similar power of command as he 'releases Barabbas' (ἀπολύω: 27:26a) and 'hands Jesus over to be crucified' (παραδίδωμι: 27:26b).

Further down the Roman hierarchy, centurions (*cf.* 8:5–13) have similar, if lesser, authority to command. As one such Roman centurion explains to Jesus, '... I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it' (8:9). Even common foot soldiers in the Roman army can 'force' others to carry burdens for a mile, some as onerous as the wooden cross on which a condemned criminal is about to be crucified (ἀγγαρεύω: 5:41; 27:32). Clearly the Roman imperial forces active in Palestine have no hesitation and find no hindrance in exercising their power of command over those under their authority.

The Jewish political leaders of Matthew's narrative are not portrayed as exhibiting the same power of command. On the contrary, they find it necessary to use alternative means to accomplish their goals. To accomplish the arrest of Jesus, they must make a financial deal with Judas Iscariot, offering him money for services rendered (26:14–16). In order to ensure a Roman verdict against Jesus, they must 'persuade' (πείθω: 27:20) the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem to demand Jesus' death. To quash any potential story of Jesus' resurrection, they must bribe the Roman guards with 'a large sum of money' (ἀργύρια ἱκανα: 28:12b) to disseminate a fabricated account about the empty tomb (28:11–15). What the Roman leaders can accomplish by simple command requires strategy, persuasion and money on the part of the Jewish leaders. Such is the power differential between the 'occupiers' and the 'occupied'.

First-century 'photo-ops': Public relations initiatives

The terminology of 'photo-ops' and the underlying political strategy of taking highly visible actions designed to impress the public and enhance one's popularity as a political figure have become a ubiquitous constant of present-day politics. Unforgettable images abound, from the 1993 handshake of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn to the 2003 speech of George W. Bush on a US aircraft carrier in front of a huge sign reading 'Mission Accomplished' and well beyond. But while the 'photos' of 'photo-op' have been around for some 150 years only, the 'opportunistic' political strategy behind the 'photo-op' is no doubt as ancient as politics itself. Within Matthew's narrative, the Jewish leaders, who have little access to simple power of command, are depicted as masters of the art of acting for public viewing and approval.

One of Jesus' persistent charges against the scribes and Pharisees is that they do their deeds in order to be 'seen'[33] and 'praised'[34] by others. They 'sound trumpets ... in the synagogues and in the streets' to announce their acts of almsgiving (6:2). They 'stand and pray' conspicuously 'in the synagogues and at the street corners' (6:5). They 'disfigure their faces' to publicise their acts of fasting (6:16). They 'make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long' to display their piety in highly visible fashion to all who see them (23:5). They delight in public honour of all types: the 'place of honour' (τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν) at banquets (23:6a), the 'best seats' (τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας) in the synagogues (23:6b), respectful 'greetings' (τοὺς ἀσπασμούς) in the marketplaces (23:7a) and the honorific title 'rabbi' (23:7b). In the face of all this evidence Jesus concludes that the scribes and Pharisees resemble

(footnote 25 continues...)
'purple cloak' of Mark for a 'scarlet robe', the attire of a Roman foot soldier and therefore a readily accessible garment (Hare 1993:318). (However, see Rv 17:3, 4; 18:12, 16 for the mention of 'scarlet' as a colour of wealth and luxury.)

26. Thus οἱ κεκκλημένοι: 22:3, 4.

27. Thus ἀνακειμένοι: 22:10, 11; συνανακειμένοι: 14:9.

28. Thus οἱ ταῦροι . . . καῖ τὰ σιτιστά: 22:4. For further mention of the 'fatted calf' as the prime menu for a banquet, *cf.* σιτευτός (Lk 15:23, 27, 30).

29. *cf.* Mark's version of the same incident (Mk 6:23), where the extravagance of Herod's act is made explicit in his promise to give Herodias' daughter anything she might wish up to 'half of (his) kingdom'.

30. Thus συνάγω: 2:4; καλέω: 2:7.

31. Thus πυνθάνομαι:2:4; ἀκριβόω: 2:7.

32. Thus πέμπω: 2:8; ἀποστέλλω: 2:16.

33. Thus φαίνω: 6:5, 16; 23:27, 28; θεάομαι: 23:5; *cf.* 6:1.

34. Thus δοξάζω: 6:2.

'whitewashed tombs' that 'look beautiful (φαίνονται ὡραῖοι)' externally but on the inside reflect a very different reality (23:27). In non-parabolic language he charges that they 'look righteous (φαίνεσθε...δίκαιοι)' on the outside, while being 'full of hypocrisy and lawlessness' on the inside (23:28).

On the Roman front the portrait is noticeably different. For the most part Matthew offers no similar 'opportunistic' depictions of the Roman imperial powers within his narrative, most likely suggesting that Matthew does not generally view them as either needing or attempting to curry favour with the Jewish populace under their military control.[35] By comparison with their Jewish counterparts, the Romans are engaged in no 'hearts and minds' operation. Instead, as will be detailed below, the Romans routinely employ violence and military force to enact the will of the empire. The prominent exception to this rule, however, is reflected in the annual crowd-pleasing gesture of Pilate, the Roman governor, at Passover, when his custom is 'to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they [want]' (27:15). Here Pilate knowingly suspends his own powers of Roman jurisdiction and submits himself intentionally to the will of the Jewish crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover. Clearly Pilate welcomes the approval of the crowd when he can gain it in opportunistic ways. The highly public context within which Pilate exercises this political gesture ('so after they had gathered': 27:17a) demonstrates without question Pilate's interest in the greatest possible political benefit. Clearly the 21st century 'photo-op' has a long and well-practised history.

Political expedience: Acquiescence to the necessary

Just one small step beyond the ubiquitous political art of self-initiated action for public appearance lie the 'expedient' responses forced on political leaders by external political necessity. Such actions clearly demonstrate the character of the political leaders in question by revealing the lengths to which they will go to do what is politically necessary, even when such actions contravene their own original intentions. Such actions likewise demonstrate the fundamental weakness of political leaders who find themselves forced into actions they have not chosen. Within his narrative Matthew indicts both Roman and Jewish leaders alike on the charge of political expedience.

The Jewish leaders, for their part, take politically expedient actions largely due to 'fear'[36] of 'the crowds'/'the people'.[37] When Jesus asks the chief priests and the elders a question about John the Baptist (21:24–25a), they rehearse the two possible responses that Jesus has offered them and the respective risks involved (21:25b–26: 'If we say ... But if we say ...'). While they consider the shame that they would encounter for failing to 'believe' one who has come 'from heaven' (21:25b), it is ultimately their 'fear' of the 'crowd', who 'regard John as a prophet' (21:26), that forces them to save their political reputations by responding, 'We do not know' (21:27). When Jesus tells an allegorical parable in which the chief priests and the Pharisees recognise their own role as the villains (21:33–44; *cf.* 21:45), their immediate desire is to 'arrest' Jesus (21:46a). But here, as before, their 'fear' of the 'crowds' prevents them from taking action, because the crowds regard not only John the Baptist but Jesus himself as a 'prophet' (21:46b). Even when the chief priests and the elders of the people gather at the palace of the high priest and conspire 'to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him' (26:4), their plans are constricted ('Not during the festival ...' [26:5a]) by their fear of the 'riot' that may ensue 'among the people' (ἵνα μὴ θόρυβος γένηται ἐν τῷ λαῷ: 26:5b).

In Matthew 27:3–10 the political expedience of the Jewish leaders appears to emerge from their fear of losing their reputation as those who do what 'is lawful'.[38] Faced with the need to dispose of the coins that Judas throws down in the temple (27:5a), the chief priests and the elders conclude that 'It is not lawful (οὐκ ἔξεστιν) to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money' (27:6). Their concern, ironically, lies not with the self-acknowledged truth that they have paid out 'blood money' in the first place, but merely with the technical 'legality' of putting such money into the temple treasury. As a result, they spend this money on an alternative and apparently 'lawful' project, a burial field for foreigners (27:7–8). As Hare (1993:313) remarks on the expedient action of the Jewish leaders, 'While the Jewish leaders openly deny their guilt ..., they are compelled to concede that they cannot receive the money as a temple offering, because it is "blood money"'.

But, just as the Jewish leaders find themselves forced into expedient actions by their fear of the crowds, so too do the Roman imperial powers. Matthew's portrayal of Herod the tetrarch (14:1–12) shows him to be little more than a puppet on a string *vis-à-vis* the other characters in the story (Weaver 1996:187–191). Herod has arrested and imprisoned John the Baptist due to John's outspoken political bluntness concerning Herod's marital affairs (14:3–5a). But when he wants to kill John, Herod finds his hands politically tied, since he 'fears the crowd', who 'regard John the Baptist as a prophet' (14:5b). Later Herod is 'grieved' at the request of Herodias' daughter, on behalf of her mother, for the head of John the Baptist (14:9a). But because he has just made an extravagant and highly public oath in front of a roomful of guests (14:6–7), Herod is forced once again into expedient action, this time 'out of regard for his oaths and for the guests' (14:9b). John the Baptist ultimately loses his head because Herod fears the entire cast of characters at the banquet – his consort Herodias (14:8a, 11b), Herodias' daughter (14:6–7, 8b, 11a) and the guests reclining at the table with him (14:6, 9b). Herod's wide-ranging fear gives rise to political expediency of the most obvious and unprincipled sort.

Matthew's portrait of Pilate, the Roman governor, shows Pilate to be equally fearful of the crowds and equally skilled at the art of the expedient (Weaver 1996:191–195). Like Herod the tetrarch, Pilate has tied his own hands politically in advance by establishing a completely open-ended and unquestionably crowd-pleasing Passover precedent *vis-à-vis* his Jewish subjects, namely 'to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted' (27:15b). Accordingly, when the crowd calls for the release of Barabbas (27:20–21) and demands that Jesus be crucified (27:22–23), Pilate has no other politically feasible options to consider. He knows that the Jewish leaders have acted out of 'jealousy' in handing Jesus over (27:18). He has learned of the dream that his wife has had concerning 'that righteous man' (τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ: 27:19b, DJW). He knows that Jesus has 'done no evil' (*cf.* 27:23a). So Pilate argues briefly with the crowds (27:23). But when a 'riot' ensues (27:24a), Pilate knows that the game is up. Having given away his own political authority well in advance and fully aware of the extreme political danger associated with 'riots', Pilate now has no choice but to do the politically expedient by 'releasing Barabbas' for the Jewish crowd and 'handing Jesus over to be crucified' (27:26).[39] Doing the politically expedient is clearly a typical *modus operandi* for the political leaders of Matthew's narrative, Jewish and Roman alike.

35. Here I distinguish between unforced political opportunism of the 'photo-op' variety and political expediency, in which political leaders are forced by political circumstances beyond their control into political actions that they would not otherwise take. Matthew charges Roman and Jewish leaders alike with 'political expediency.'

36. Thus φοβέομαι: 21:26, 46.

37. Thus ὁ ὄχλος/οἱ ὄχλοι: 21:26, 46; *cf.* ὁ λαός: 26:5.

38. Thus ἔξεστιν: 27:6; *cf.* 12:2, 4, 10, 12; 14:4; 19:3; 20:15; 22:17.

39. Compare the similar fear of the Jewish leaders concerning the outbreak of a 'riot' in Matthew 26:5. Contra Carter (2001:165), Matthew's emphatic threefold indication of Jesus' innocence, depicted as in the mind (27:18), in the hearing (27:19b) and on the tongue (19:23a) of Pilate himself, invites the reader to conclude that Pilate acts in spite of his own better knowledge and instincts.

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'Campaign rhetoric': Verbal attack and the art of persuasion

To read the Matthean accounts of the controversies between the Jewish leaders and Jesus is to enter a world that strongly resembles a 21st century election campaign between rival politicians. Here the Jewish leaders are mounting what appears to be an energetic political campaign in front of the Jewish crowds to discredit and defeat their political opponent, Jesus, and to win over the hearts and minds of the Jewish people for themselves.

The strategies that they adopt in this campaign are the standard tools of all political campaigns: verbal attacks on the opponent and persuasion of the supporters. The Jewish leaders open their campaign with virtually inaudible muttering (9:3, 4), but their attacks escalate to direct verbal challenges[40] and public pronouncements against Jesus (9:32–34; 12:22–24). They work indirectly, challenging Jesus' disciples on the actions of their 'teacher' (9:10–13); and they take Jesus to task conversely for the actions of his 'disciples' (12:1–8; 15:1–9) and the words of the children in the temple (21:14–16). They question Jesus 'maliciously' (τὴν πονηρίαν: 22:18; *cf.* πονηρα: 9:4) in public settings ranging from Galilean synagogues to the Jerusalem temple, in order to 'accuse' him (κατηγορέω: 12:10), to 'test' him (πειράζω: 16:1; 19:3; 22:35) and to 'entrap' him (παγιδεύω: 22:15). They demand that he show them 'signs [from heaven]' (12:38–42; 16:1–4). They challenge him to his face (21:23–27) and denounce him before the Jewish crowds in public proclamations (9:32–34; 12:22–24).

The campaign rhetoric of the Jewish leaders sounds two prominent themes. On the one hand the Jewish leaders challenge Jesus persistently on the question of what is 'lawful' or 'not lawful' (ἔξεστιν/οὐκ ἔξεστιν): plucking grain on the Sabbath (12:1–8); healing on the Sabbath (12:9–14); divorcing one's wife 'for any cause' (19:3–9); and paying taxes to the emperor (22:15–22). In a similar vein they accuse Jesus' disciples of 'breaking the tradition of the elders' by failing to 'wash their hands before they eat' (15:2); and they castigate Jesus himself for 'eating with tax collectors and sinners' (9:11). To underscore their concerns about the law, they 'test' Jesus on the 'greatest commandment in the law' (22:35–36).

But just as crucial to their rhetorical strategy is the challenge that the Jewish leaders raise with regard to Jesus' 'authority' (ἐξουσία: 9:8; 21:23, 24, 27). They charge Jesus with 'blasphemy' for pronouncing forgiveness of sins, while the crowds '[glorify] God, who [has] given such authority to human beings' (9:8). They denounce Jesus as one who casts out demons 'by (Beelzebub), the ruler of the demons' (9:34; 12:24; *cf.* 10:25) and therefore implicitly not by the 'authority' of God. After Jesus has turned the temple upside down and thoroughly disrupted their financial enterprise (21:12–13), the chief priests and elders of the people accost Jesus as he teaches in the temple and put the question to him directly: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (21:23b).

Ultimately, however, the success or failure of the Jewish political campaign to discredit Jesus and bring about his demise rests on the ability of the Jewish leaders to rally their own supporters, convince them *vis-à-vis* the cause in question and engage them in effective political action. Throughout the Galilean segment of Matthew's narrative there is no evidence of any such successful efforts by the Jewish leaders at public persuasion. But at the most critical moment for their strategic purposes, Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Jewish power brokers in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders finally succeed in their political efforts as they '(persuade) (πείθω) the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed' (27:20).

40.Thus 9:10–13; 12:1–8, 9–14, 38–42; 15:1–9; 16:1–4; 19:3–9; 21:14–16, 23–27; 22:15–22, 34–40.

Matthew offers no hints as to how the Jewish leaders carry out this political 'persuasion'. All the readers witness is the outcome of their 'persuasive' efforts. To judge from the evidence at hand, this 'persuasion' is hardly built on a nuanced argument that can be debated on the merits. Rather, the crowd has clearly been offered a standard 'party line' response that can be supported only by increasingly vociferous repetition. When Pilate seeks to engage the crowds in rational discussion of the logic of their decision against Jesus – 'Why, what evil has he done?' (27:23a) – the crowds have no reasoned argumentation to offer. Instead they merely repeat the 'party line' that they have apparently been given by the Jewish leaders: 'Let him be crucified!' (27:23b). And, far from judicial debate, it is the ensuing 'riot' (θόρυβος: 27:24a) caused by screaming crowds shouting their verdict repetitiously (27:23)[41] that brings about the desired political results. Pilate, who attempts to debate the judicial merits of the case in front of him (27:23a), ultimately accedes to the will of the screaming mob (27:23b–24a) and carries out their wishes (27:24b–26). To this extent the efforts of the Jewish leaders at political persuasion are indeed successful. Just days later they announce with confidence that they can 'persuade' (πείθω: 28:14; DJW) the governor himself, if political circumstances demand such action. Clearly the power of persuasion is a critical skill for the Jewish leadership in their political enterprise as the community organisers of the Jewish people.

The portrait is characteristically different for the Romans. Just as the Roman imperial powers depicted within Matthew's narrative do not frequently engage in opportunistic actions designed to win the hearts and minds of their subject peoples, so they likewise do not engage in verbal campaigns defaming their opponents or attempt, conversely, to garner the support of the masses through the art of rhetorical persuasion. Those who have military means to enact the will of the empire by the power of brute force have less need perhaps to 'persuade' their subject peoples through political argumentation. Instead, for the Roman imperial hierarchy, it is military power itself that does the work of political persuasion. Therefore when Herod, the client king over Judea, is 'disturbed' at the news he hears (ἐταράχθη: 2:3a; TNIV), Matthew notes that Herod's unease is shared by 'all Jerusalem with him' (2:3b). As the events of the unfolding narrative suggest (2:13–18), it is sheer, and no doubt well-experienced, political instinct that infects the people of Jerusalem with the moods of Herod himself. They therefore realise instinctively that when Herod is 'disturbed' (2:3; TNIV) – let alone 'infuriated' (ἐθυμώθη: 2:16a) – danger is never far away (2:16b). The moods of Herod and what they portend, accordingly, are shown to be as politically 'persuasive' as the verbal rhetoric of the Jewish leaders.

Misspeaking the truth: Public lies and political deception

While the campaign rhetoric of the political leaders in Matthew's narrative may be strong and harsh, the clear implication of the text is that this rhetoric, for the most part, reflects the honest opinions of its speakers. The controversies between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, for example, are generally portrayed as genuine controversies, in which the Jewish leaders actually believe the charges that they bring against Jesus. Matthew calls the reader to believe, for example, that the Jewish leaders honestly debate the 'lawfulness' of Jesus' actions and honestly challenge his 'authority'. But political rhetoric, in the heat of the political battle, often extends well beyond honest differences into the realm of what is euphemistically called 'misspeaking the truth' or, in other words, public lies and political deception. On this front Matthew paints both the Roman imperial powers and the Jewish leadership with the same brush.

Herod, the client king ruling Judea for the Romans, sets the stage for this type of cynical political behaviour at the very beginning

41.The imperfect form of the verb ἔκραζον in Matthew 27:23b clearly implies the repetitious character of the shouting.

of Matthew's narrative. When the wise men are called to appear before Herod (2:7), they apparently make the assumption that they are simply receiving a royal welcome to Jerusalem and a private (*cf.* 2:7: 'secret'/ λάθρᾳ) audience with a king who is vitally interested in the search that has brought them there. Matthew gives us no reason to believe that they are concerned about potential danger. They offer Herod the information he is seeking (2:7) and unhesitatingly obey his command to go to Bethlehem (2:9). It takes nothing short of a divine dream-warning to deter them from returning to Herod with the information that he seeks (2:12).

But Matthew's readers are not fooled. Matthew has already clued the readers in to Herod's malicious intentions with his notice that Herod is 'disturbed' at the news of Jesus' birth. So when Herod charges the wise men to 'bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage' (2:8), Matthew's readers know that danger is afoot. Surely Herod's 'homage' is more threat than promise. But they are forced to look on helplessly for three interminable verses (2:9–11), while the wise men cheerfully carry out Herod's commands in blissful ignorance of his evil intentions. Finally the dream-warning sends the wise men home 'by another road' (2:12), a clear signal to the wise men themselves that Herod has in fact deceived them. In the following verses Matthew confirms for his readers what they have suspected all along: Herod is intent on 'seek[ing] the child's life' (2:20) and 'destroying' him (2:13). In order to do so, he brutally annihilates an entire population of young children in Bethlehem (2:16). Herod's words about 'homage', while they do not fool Matthew's readers, are intentional, and initially successful, political deception of the most cynical order for those to whom they are spoken.

If Matthew's narrative opens with an account of political deception by the Roman imperial powers, it concludes with a depiction of just such deception carried out by the Jewish chief priests and elders (28:11–15). Faced with a missing body (28:5–6) and an unsatisfactory explanation by the soldiers set to guard the tomb (28:11), the chief priests and elders fabricate a dangerously self-incriminating version of events for the soldiers to disseminate (28:13b): 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep'. Then they bribe the soldiers lavishly to pass on this fabrication (28:12–13a). The Jewish leaders who could not find 'false testimony' against Jesus at his trial in spite of their most strenuous efforts (26:59–60) are now successful in disseminating their own 'false testimony' (28:15a), a story which in Matthew's words is 'still told among the Jews to this day' (28:15b). Public deception is clearly standard practice for the political leaders of Matthew's narrative, whether Roman or Jewish.

Conspiracy to destroy political enemies

One of the most notorious, most ubiquitous and, sadly, most successful strategies across the globe for gaining and/or retaining political power lies in the age-old art of political conspiracy, i.e. 'joining in a secret agreement to do an unlawful or wrongful act or to use such means to accomplish a lawful end' (Webster & Gove 1969:178). Most frequently such conspiracies focus on the goal of destroying political enemies. Some conspiracies rise to the level of confirmed fact. Mere mention of the word 'Watergate' evokes memories of one of the most notorious political conspiracies in American history, a conspiracy confirmed as fact day after day in congressional hearings during the summer of 1973 by the riveting testimony of such actual co-conspirators as John Dean, counsel to then president Richard M. Nixon. Other conspiracies exist as undying yet seemingly non-provable theories. Oliver Stone's provocative movie, JFK, raises just such indestructible conspiracy theories concerning the 1963 death of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. But, whether proven or unproven, conspiracies remain a notorious constant in the realm of worldwide politics.

Matthew's first-century narrative is awash with actual conspiracies, whether narrated to us by Matthew's omniscient implied author or confirmed for us by the words of the conspirators in question. Matthew's vocabulary offers us the technical terminology to denote conspiracy: συμβουλεύω (26:4) and συμβούλιον λαμβάνω (12:14; 22:15; 27:1, 7; 28:12). This correlated terminology is variously translated by the NRSV as 'conspire' (12:14; 26:4), 'plot' (22:15), 'confer together' (27:1) and 'devise a plan' (28:12) as it denotes conspiracies.[42]

Even in places where such technical terminology does not show up, Matthew uses alternative vocabulary or adopts other means to depict the conspiratorial actions of the characters in question (2:1–23; 21:33–46; 26:57–68).

The conspiracies of Matthew's narrative focus on the characters of John the Baptist and Jesus. In the case of John the Baptist it is Herodias who conspires together with her daughter to bring about John's death. For her part she 'prompts' (προβιβάζω) her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist delivered on a platter (14:8). Her daughter in turn plays her part in the conspiracy by verbalising the request (14:8), receiving the head of John the Baptist on the requested platter (14:11a) and handing the platter and head over to her mother (14:11b).

In the case of Jesus, Matthew's narrative portrays conspiracies on the part of his opponents to defeat him in debate (22:15), to kill him outright,[43] and to deny his resurrection (28:12–14). These conspiracies span the entire length of the narrative. Two of these conspiracies, recounted in Matthew 2:1–23 and 28:11–15, create a framing device that forms a virtual but penultimate *'inclusio'* around the narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.[44] Accordingly, the entire story of Jesus, as Matthew tells it, has as its fundamental counterpoint the motif of conspiratorial opposition to Jesus by the political leaders of the region, both Roman and Jewish.

The story is framed on the opening end by the quasi-conspiracy of Herod the king upon hearing news of 'the one who has been born king of the Jews' (2:1). Herod first engages the unwitting collaboration of the Jewish chief priests and scribes of the people (2:4–6) on the one hand and the Gentile 'wise men' from the east (2:1–2, 7–8, 16) on the other in a secret and deadly scheme of his own design to 'seek the child's life' (2:20) and 'destroy' him (2:13). Matthew's narration underscores the conspiratorial character of Herod's scheme with its vivid and evocative vocabulary. Herod 'calls together' the chief priests and scribes for a high-level consultation.[45] He arranges a 'secret' meeting with the magi (λάθρα: 2:7). He interrogates his Jewish and Gentile informants closely[46] regarding the exact place where (2:4–6) and the exact time when (2:7, 16) this 'king of the Jews' was born. Ultimately, Herod's quasi-conspiracy turns into a genuine conspiracy, as he sends his military henchmen out, fully aware of their task, to '[kill] all the children in and around Bethlehem who [are] two years old or under' (2:16b). Clearly the Roman imperial powers are masters of the art of political conspiracy.

But as the narrative progresses, it is Jesus' Jewish opponents who mount repeated conspiracies against him. When Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath (12:9–14), they conspire to 'destroy him' (12:14). When Jesus defeats them in public debate, they conspire to 'entrap him in what he [says]' (22:15). Eventually they conspire to 'arrest Jesus by stealth' (26:4), charge him with

42. But see Matthew 27:7, where the same vocabulary depicts the chief priests and the elders (27:3; *cf.* 27:6) 'conferring together' in non-conspiratorial fashion over how to dispose of the coins that Judas has thrown onto the temple floor (27:5).

43. Thus 2:4, 7–8, 13, 16, 20; 12:14; 21:38; 26:4, 59; 27:1.

44. Conspiracy against Jesus, as central as it is to the plot of Matthew's story, is neither the first word (1:1–25) nor the last word of this story (28:16–20). The threat to Jesus, Messiah (1:1, 16, 17, 18) and Son of God (28:19; *cf.* 3:17; 17:5), which is posed by such conspiracy, has accordingly only 'penultimate' power.

45. Thus συνάγω: 2:4; *cf.* 26:3–4, 57/59; 28:12, where συνάγω and the vocabulary of conspiracy coincide.

46. Thus πυνθάνομαι: 2:4; ἀκριβόω: 2:7, 16; *cf.* ἐξετάζω ἀκριβῶς: 2:8.

'false testimony' (27:59) and 'kill him' (26:4, 59; 27:1). To carry out their plot they hire an informant from among Jesus' own disciples to 'hand him over' to them (26:14–16).

The impetus for these conspiracies by the Jewish leaders is their intense political 'jealousy' of Jesus, as Pilate clearly recognises (27:18). Jesus himself identifies the source of this jealousy in the allegorical parable of the wicked tenants to whom the landowner sends his son (21:38): 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance'. Accordingly, the jealousy of the Jewish authorities and their conspiracies against him in Matthew's narrative reflect a fundamental power struggle with Jesus over leadership of the Jewish people, framed here as the 'inheritance' of the Jewish 'vineyard' (i.e. Israel; *cf.* Is 5:1–7). Initially the Jewish leaders appear to win this power struggle, when they succeed in bringing about the death of Jesus (*cf.* 27:1–2, 15–26).

But when the dead body of Jesus disappears mysteriously from the tomb several days later (28:1–11), the chief priests and elders are forced to engage in a final, desperate conspiracy to counter the message of Jesus' resurrection (28:12–15) and assure their continuing hold over the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. The Jewish leaders pay a handsome bribe (28:12b: 'a large sum of money') to the Roman soldiers to pass on the dangerously self-incriminating story that Jesus' disciples 'came by night and stole him away while we were asleep' (28:13b). With their significant powers of 'persuasion' (πείθω: 28:14b; *cf.* 27:20) the Jewish leaders promise to keep the soldiers out of trouble, in case their open admission of dereliction of duty reaches Pilate, the Roman governor (28:14a/c). This conspiracy is highly effective and enormously durable in the Jewish community. As Matthew acknowledges, the story is still being told 'among the Jews' in his own day (28:15). Along with their Roman counterparts the Jewish leaders of Matthew's narrative are clearly well skilled at the art of political conspiracy.

Subversion of justice: Judicial systems run amok

There is likely no more iconic image of the misuse of political power than that of a show trial, where the jury is stacked against the defendant, the guilty verdict determined in advance, or the outcome of the trial dictated by the emotions of a lynch mob. Images of such cynical travesties of justice span the centuries and circle the globe with grim and distressing regularity, leaving few nations or judicial systems innocent and untouched. One such vivid image comes to us from Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest and trials before Jewish (26:3–5, 14–16, 47–66; 27:1–2) and Roman (27:11–26) courts. While Matthew portrays the Jewish leaders and the Roman governor as conducting their judicial affairs in significantly different fashion, he nevertheless lays unmistakable blame on both Jewish and Roman leaders for the miscarriage of justice over which they each in turn preside.

The Jewish miscarriage of justice begins days before Jesus' trial with the conspiracy of the chief priests and the elders 'to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him' (26:4). Both the language of 'stealth' and the stated intention to 'kill' Jesus offer vivid evidence in advance that there will be no legitimate judicial proceedings when Jesus is arrested. Instead, the outcome of the trial has already been determined; and 'stealth' is accordingly a necessary strategy to conceal the blatant illegitimacy of the proceedings that lie ahead. The picture grows still darker when Judas Iscariot presents himself to the chief priests and offers his services to 'hand Jesus over' (DJW) to them for a fee (26:14–16). The conspiracy is now fully fledged. The 'hit man' has now been hired.

The arrest of Jesus takes place both with the intended 'stealth' but likewise with the trappings of enormous physical force. Judas seeks out Jesus at night time in Gethsemane (26:36), so the arrest can take place in a dark and secluded garden, well away from the light of day and the crowded city streets of Jerusalem. But Judas Iscariot brings along with him 'a large crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the elders of the people' (26:47b). Jesus himself challenges the arrest posse both on the location of the arrest (26:55b: 'Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me') and on the excessive force employed (26:55a: 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?'). With this depiction of Jesus' arrest Matthew's narrative imagery clearly suggests the fundamental illegitimacy of the proceedings at hand.[47]

Nor do things improve when Jesus is brought before Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and the assembled Jewish leaders (26:57). Here there is neither interest in nor attempt at a genuine legal proceeding with the goal of uncovering the truth of the matter. To the contrary, the chief priests and the 'whole council' are engaged in a massive and energetic search for 'false testimony against Jesus' toward the express goal 'that they might put him to death' (26:59). Their failure to obtain 'false testimony' apparently reflects their inability to find corroborating stories among the 'many false witnesses' (26:60) who take the stand against Jesus.[48]

When Jesus refuses to respond to the apparently true charge finally brought against him by two witnesses (26:60c–63a),[49] the high priest adopts an alternative strategy, putting Jesus under oath to declare whether he is 'the Messiah, the Son of God' (26:63b). The obvious ploy here, as confirmed by the unfolding events of the narrative, is to establish the capital charge of 'blasphemy' against Jesus.[50]

Jesus' tacit affirmation (26:64a: 'You have said so') and the accompanying prediction about the coming Son of Man (26:64b) clearly provide Caiaphas with the ammunition he needs to pronounce the charge of 'blasphemy' against Jesus (26:65) and to call forth the formal verdict from the assembled council (26:66b): 'He deserves death'. Here Matthew's irony is biting. While the Jewish leaders are unable to convict Jesus on the 'false testimony' that they are intentionally seeking (26:59–60), they ultimately achieve their goal by pronouncing a false verdict of which they are completely unaware. As Matthew's readers know well, Jesus is indeed 'the Messiah, the Son of God' (3:17; 17:5).

Therefore the verdict of the Jewish council is false, not because 'blasphemy' itself is not a capital crime but rather because Jesus is indeed the Messiah and Son of God and therefore his witness to this effect is not blasphemy. As a result the Jewish leaders preside over a judicial travesty both knowingly and unknowingly. Matthew holds them accountable on both fronts.

However, this is not the end of their culpability. In the morning, after the late night trial, the Jewish leaders consummate their conspiracy by '[binding] Jesus, [leading] him away and [handing] him over to Pilate the governor' (27:1–2). With this act the Jewish leaders join Judas in the culpability for 'handing over' an 'innocent' man to certain death (27:3–4a), and they also disregard in cavalier fashion Judas' subsequent witness to the 'innocence' of Jesus: 'What is that to us? See to it yourself' (27:4b). Their final act in this judicial travesty is to stack the jury of public opinion against Jesus and 'persuade' (27:20) the crowds gathered

47. Within the scope of this article I work strictly with the narrative force of Matthew's story. I make no attempt here to resolve any of the urgent historical questions surrounding the actual trial(s) of Jesus.

48. See Deuteronomy 19:15, where the Jewish law stipulates that 'Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained'.

49. In pointed distinction to his Markan source, which identifies the 'temple destruction' charge against Jesus as 'false' (Mk14:57–58), Matthew carefully distinguishes the 'many false witnesses' (26:60b) and the 'two who came forward' (26:60c) and maintains that the Jewish leaders do not in fact find the 'false testimony' that they are seeking (26:59a/60a).

50. Thus Leviticus 24:16a/b: 'One who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer'. The historical question of whether Jesus' declaration would in fact have constituted 'blasphemy' according to Jewish law if it were not true is a moot point for Matthew's narrative, which simply offers the verdict of Caiaphas and the council as the legal status of the question.

before Pilate to call for the release of Barabbas, a 'notorious prisoner' (27:16, 17a, 20a, 21), and demand the death of Jesus by crucifixion (27:20b, 22–23). Matthew's damning account of the judicial culpability of the Jewish leaders concludes with the assessment of Pilate that they have acted not out of genuine legal concerns but rather out of a politically motivated 'jealousy' (φθόνος: 27:18).[51]

But despite his political astuteness Pilate fares no better than the Jewish leaders in Matthew's narrative depiction. While Matthew charges the Jewish leaders with politically motivated 'jealousy' and a blatant attempt to gain advantage over their opponent by 'false' means, Matthew accuses Pilate of the equally damning charge of political expedience.[52] Here Pilate's knowledge and his astuteness serve only to heighten his culpability in Matthew's assessment. Pilate has all the information, the political instinct and the inherent authority that he needs to conduct an honest and fair judicial proceeding. He knows the innocence of the defendant (27:19, 23). He understands the political motivation of the plaintiffs (27:18). He clearly has the authority as Roman governor to 'release' defendants when the circumstances warrant (27:15, 17, 21; *cf.* 27:26). But in spite of all these qualifications Pilate presides over a miscarriage of justice just as egregious and just as culpable as that of the Jewish leaders.

His first false move is to hand his own judicial authority over to the Passover crowds in line with his annual custom 'to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they [want]' (27:15). Pilate then compounds his first error by overriding his own native instinct about the truth of the matter (27:18), neglecting the exculpatory evidence brought to his attention (27:19) and responding instead in expedient fashion out of his political fear of the crowds and the 'riot' that they instigate in front of him (27:24a). Pilate then brings his miscarriage of justice to a vivid and bitterly ironic conclusion as he 'washes his hands before the crowd' (27:24a; *cf.* Dt 21:6–7, Ps 26:6, 73:13), claims his own 'innocence' instead of the 'innocence' of his defendant (27:24b),[53] releases a 'notorious prisoner' to a shouting mob (27:26a; *cf.* 27:16) and 'hands Jesus over to be crucified' (27:26c). Just as Judas (26:15, 16, 48) and the Jewish leaders (27:2) have each done in their turn, Pilate now assumes the final culpability for 'handing Jesus over' to death. Matthew leaves his readers with no doubt that the political leaders of Jesus' day, both Jewish and Roman, are masters at the art of subverting justice on the judicial level.

The politics of violence: Ultimate political sanctions

The ultimate and most egregious use of political power within any given society is reflected in those acts of emotional and physical violence by which political leaders seek first to demoralise and then to destroy their political adversaries in order to secure their own political power. Images and stories of such politically motivated violence by powerbrokers of our world fill our newspapers, our airwaves and our television screens regularly. Arrest and imprisonment of political adversaries, mockery and torture of political prisoners, kidnappings, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, assassinations and the legalised imposition of capital punishment are, with alarming frequency, the standard *modus operandi* of those who wield political power in our 21st century world.

The situation is no different in the world of Matthew's narrative. The use of violence as an ultimate political sanction is clearly an unquestioned assumption for the political leaders of Matthew's narrative, both Roman and Jewish. Such violence begins at very least with the arrest of prisoners. Within Matthew's narrative prisoners are 'arrested'.[54] 'seized',[55] 'dragged' before authorities,[56] 'led away',[57] and 'handed over' [58] to prison,[59] trial and execution. Those who arrest prisoners 'lay hands on' them,[60] 'bind' them,[61] and use 'swords and clubs' to carry out their arrests.[62]

Once arrested, prisoners then encounter both the emotional violence of mockery and the physical violence of torture. Those who hold prisoners in their power 'mock' them both verbally[63] and in elaborately staged rituals intended to ridicule their victims (27:27–31). The vivid and detailed account of Jesus' 'royal' mockery by an entire cohort of Pilate's soldiers – with the scarlet robe, the crown of thorns, the reed sceptre, the genuflection and the acclamation, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' – appears to reflect the common means by which Roman soldiers entertain themselves at their prisoners' expense in the course of their military service for the governor. The verbal taunts hurled at Jesus by those in authority, whether Jewish (26:68; 27:42–43) or Roman (27:29c), clearly reflect a culture in which verbal abuse of prisoners by those in authority is viewed by those same authorities as standard and acceptable practice.

Beyond the level of verbal abuse a prisoner may suffer the public indignity of being 'stripped' of his clothing (ἐκδύω: 27:28, 31), dressed up for mockery (27:28–29) and then re-clothed with his own garments (ἐνδύω: 27:31). The physical abuse and 'mistreatment'[64] that prisoners endure extend from acts of public ridicule to acts of brutal torture. Prisoners are 'spit on' in what is no doubt universally understood to be an act of contempt and shaming.[65] They are 'slapped'[66] and 'struck'[67] with the hands or with a rod. They are 'beaten' with a rod[68] or 'flogged' with a whip,[69] whether in Jewish synagogues (10:17; 23:34) or in Roman courtyards (*cf.* 20:19). Surely most brutal of all, they are 'flogged' with the Roman flagellum,[70] an instrument of torture that contains bits of lead and bone intended specifically to increase the pain and the physical injuries of the victims. [71]

But torture is merely the prelude to the final act of violence. Prisoners who have been formally condemned to death (20:18; 26:66) or otherwise destined to die are then 'killed'[72] in a manner consistent with the respective practices of the political powers in question. The Jewish leaders, when they assume the authority

51. *cf.* 21:38, where apparent jealousy of the 'heir' (ὁ κληρόνομος) and 'his inheritance' (τὴν κληρονομίαν αὐτοῦ) is the self-identified motivation for the murder of the landowner's son.

52. See the discussion above on political expedience.

53. Thus ἀθῷός εἰμι: 27:24; *cf.* αἷμα ἀθῷον: 27:4.

54. Thus συλλαμβάνω: 26:55.

55. Thus λαμβάνω: 21:35, 39; κρατέω: 14:3; 21:46; 22:6; 26:4, 48, 50, 55, 57.

56. Thus ἄγω: 10:18.

57. Thus ἀπάγω: 26:57; 27:2, 31.

58. Thus παραδίδωμι: 4:12; 10:17, 19; 17:22; 20:18, 19; 24:9; 26:2, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 45, 46, 48; 27:2, 4, 26.

59. Thus δεσμωτήριον: 11:2; φυλακή: 14:3, 10.

60. Thus ἐπιβάλλω τὰς χεῖρας: 26:50.

61. Thus δέω: 14:3; 27:2.

62. Thus μαχαιρῶν καὶ ξύλων: 26:47, 55.

63. Thus ἐμπαίζω: 20:19; 27:29, 31, 41.

64. *cf.* ὑβρίζω: 22:6.

65. Thus ἐμπτύω: 26:67; 27:30.

66. Thus ῥαπίζω: 26:67.

67. Thus κολαφίζω: 26:67; παίω: 26:68; τύπτω: 27:30.

68. Thus δέρω: 21:35.

69. Thus μαστιγόω: 10:17; 20:19; 23:34.

70. Thus φραγελλόω: 27:26.

71. *cf.*, for example, Douglas R. A. Hare, Matthew (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 318.

72. Thus θανατόω: 26:59; 27:1; ἀπόλλυμι: 27:2; ἀποκτείνω: 10:18; 14:5; 16:21; 17:23; 23:34, 37; 24:9; 26:4; *cf.* 21:35, 38, 39; 22:6.

to carry out their own death sentences, stone their victims to death,[73] a practice legislated in the Torah (Lv 20:2; 24:14; Dt 13:10). Herod the tetrarch, acting on the wishes of his consort, Herodias, decapitates John the Baptist.[74] The Romans, for their part, crucify political insurgents and common criminals.[75]

In cases where there are no apparent judicial proceedings at all, Matthew's narrative depicts politically motivated assassinations or 'search and destroy' missions. At the behest of Herod the king countless children are 'killed' (ἀναιρέω) en masse in a slaughter constituting collective punishment for the very young of Bethlehem (2:16c): 'And Herod sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under ...' Jesus, for his part, speaks of a Jewish prophet from an earlier era ('Zechariah, son of Barachiah'), who is 'murdered' (φονεύω) in the Jerusalem temple 'between the sanctuary and the altar' (23:35; *cf.* 23:31) – an apparent allusion to the politically motivated stoning death of 'Zechariah, son of the priest Jehoida' at the command of King Joash, but apparently without a formal judicial hearing, due to the king's displeasure at Zechariah's unpatriotic prophecy against the people of Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chr 24:20–22). Elsewhere, Jesus tells an allegorical parable of a landowner's servants and son who are 'stoned' to death (λιθοβολέω: 21:35) or 'killed' (21:35, 38, 39) by the vineyard tenants to whom they are sent to collect the produce of the vineyard. In a similar vein Jesus likewise depicts servants who are 'killed' (ἀποκτείνω: 22:6) or 'murdered' (*cf.* τοὺς φονεῖς: 22:7) by those whom they are sent to invite to the wedding banquet for the king's son.

In general terms the politically powerful within Matthew's narrative 'persecute' their political opponents,[76] while 'the violent take the [kingdom of heaven] by force' (11:12).[77] For their part the victims of the politically powerful 'suffer'/'suffer violence' at the hands of the power brokers.[78] The 'blood' of 'prophets',[79] 'righteous' ones,[80] and 'innocent' victims[81] is shed by those who have the political will and power to do so. In speaking of the politically motivated execution of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod the tetrarch, Jesus concludes in blunt and uncompromising language: 'I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased' (17:12). In Matthew's view, there are no identifiable limits to the violence and brutality that the political leaders of his narrative exercise in order to retain their political power.

Failed leadership: A Matthean assessment

Throughout his narrative Matthew passes unambiguous judgement on the political leaders in question, charging both Roman and Jewish power brokers with reprehensible use of political power. The evidence is straightforward.

Jesus himself assesses the Roman use of political power in a few brief but pointed words (20:25): 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν), and their great ones are tyrants over them (κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν)'. To further reinforce this negative judgement, Jesus adds, 'It will not be so among you' (20:26a), and he then delineates a radically new approach to being 'great' (20:26b–28).

But Jesus saves most of his harsh words for the political leaders of the Jewish community. On the one hand he depicts the Jewish leaders as the 'tenants' to whom God the 'landowner' has leased the 'vineyard' of Israel (21:33), and he identifies the Jewish leaders as those who 'sit on the seat of Moses' (23:2). But Jesus grants authority to the Jewish leaders with one hand only to take it back with the other. The 'tenants', as the Jewish leaders are forced to acknowledge in their own words,[82] ultimately prove themselves to be 'wretches' (κακούς) who will face a 'miserable death' (κακῶς ἀπολέσει) and in the process forfeit the 'vineyard' to others (21:41). And those who 'sit on the seat of Moses' (23:2) and speak words that are to be heeded (23:3a: 'So do whatever they teach you and follow it') nevertheless prove themselves to be 'hypocrites'[83] who 'do not practice what they teach' (23:3c) and whose lifestyle Jesus accordingly warns his disciples not to emulate (23:3b: 'But do not do as they do').

Matthew, for his part, charges the Jewish leaders with lacking the 'authority' (ἐξουσία) that characterises Jesus' teaching ministry (7:29). He portrays them as failing repeatedly to lead the people under their charge. Not only do the scribes and Pharisees fail the 'mercy' test to which Jesus submits their legal judgements (ἔλεος: 9:13; 12:7; 23:23), but the chief priests and elders likewise fail to exercise their fundamental intermediary role between the people and God when Judas comes to them confessing that he has 'sinned' (27:3–4a). Instead of caring for Judas in their priestly capacity, they throw his 'sin' back into his face with the caustic words, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself' (27:3b). Similarly, while the 'God-forsaken' Jesus hangs dying on a Roman cross (*cf.* 27:46), the chief priests, scribes and elders make no intermediary effort to plead with God on Jesus' behalf.[84] Instead they exhibit a cavalier disregard for human suffering, taunting Jesus to 'save himself' (27:42a; *cf.* 27:40a) and 'come down from the cross' (27:42b; *cf.* 27:40a). They likewise exhibit a cynical distrust of God himself, taunting God in similar fashion to 'deliver' Jesus 'if he wants to' (27:43b).

Clearly the Jewish leaders of Matthew's narrative are not fulfilling the leadership role to which they have been called as 'shepherds of Israel' (*cf.* Ezr 34:1–10). Jesus accordingly 'has compassion' for the Jewish crowds (*cf.* Ezek 34:11–16), because he views them as 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36).

'WHEN HEROD DIED': MATTHEW'S ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLITICAL POWER

As illustrated above, Matthew's Gospel is replete with vivid depictions of the exercise of political power as carried out by Jewish and Roman political leaders in the world of Matthew's narrative. Along with these depictions, as also noted above, comes Matthew's consistently negative assessment of the ethical character of such political initiatives through the multi-faceted rhetoric of his storytelling. But there is another crucial means by which to evaluate the exercise of political power within Matthew's narrative on its own terms, namely the simple question of effectiveness. The manifest purpose for exercising political power is to achieve corresponding political goals, whether stated or un-stated. Accordingly a crucial signal of

73. Thus λιθοβολέω: 21:35; 23:37; *cf.* John 8:5, the account of the woman taken in adultery, and Acts 7:58–59, the account of the stoning of Stephen by a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem.

74. Thus ἀποκεφαλίζω: 14:10; *cf.* the references to John's 'head' (κεφαλή) in 14:8, 11.

75. Thus σταυρόω: 20:19; 23:34; 26:2; 27:22, 23, 26, 31, 35, 38; 28:5; συσταυρόω: 27:44; ὁ σταυρός: 10:38; 16:24; 27:32, 40, 42.

76. Thus διώκω: 5:10, 11, 12; 10:23; 23:34.

77. Thus καὶ βιάσται ἁρπάζουσιν αὐτήν.

78. Thus πάσχω: 16:21; 17:12; βιάζομαι: 11:12.

79. Thus τῷ αἵματι τῶν προφητῶν: 23:30.

80. Thus πᾶν αἷμα δίκαιον / τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Ἅβελ τοῦ δικαίου: 23:35.

81. Thus αἷμα ἀθῷον: 27:4; *cf.* 27:6, 24, 25.

82. In a remarkable verbal manoeuvre the Matthean Jesus obliges the Jewish leaders to pronounce a verdict on themselves as he asks them about the ultimate fate of the 'tenants' in the story he has just recounted to them (*cf.* Mk 12:1–9, where Jesus poses the question rhetorically and answers it himself).

83. Thus ὑποκριταί: 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5, 15:7; 16:3; 22:18; 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29.

84. See, for example, Exodus 33:1–6/12–23, where Moses pleads successfully with the LORD not to abandon God's people, as God has threatened ('I will not go up among you': 33:3b), but instead to 'go with (them)' (33:16a) to the land to which they are going; *cf.* also Numbers 14:10b–25; 16:41–50; 21:4–9, where Moses likewise intercedes successfully with God on behalf of the people.

Matthew's perspectives on the exercise of political power lies in the narrative depiction of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of political initiatives to achieve their intended goals.

On this front Matthew exhibits a strong penchant for the ironic, as he paints political caricatures of the Jewish and Roman leaders, portrays the ineffectiveness of their political initiatives, and depicts their frequent failures to achieve the political goals they set out to accomplish. While political power can without question effect crucial results ranging from public influence on or persuasion of the masses (2:3; 27:20) to blatant miscarriage of justice (26:59; 27:15–26) and the resulting execution of the 'righteous' or 'innocent' (23:35; 27:3–4, 19, 23; *cf.* 2:16), the narrative rhetoric of Matthew's Gospel clearly and persistently depicts the limits of political power to achieve the ultimate goals of the political operatives in question. A review of the evidence will serve to establish Matthew's ironic and negative perspectives on the exercise of political power by the Jewish and Roman leaders within his narrative.

Lavish lifestyle

For Herod the tetrarch (14:1–12), lavish lifestyle appears on the surface to be its own reward. The life of partying, with a group of reclining guests (14:9; *cf.* 14:6), fine entertainment (14:6) and an extravagant and highly public award ceremony (14:7), is clearly a luxury for the wealthy and powerful to enjoy. But it is this same luxurious lifestyle that reveals Herod as a fundamentally weak character, a man forced into expedient actions (14:9–11) due to fear of his consort Herodias (14:3, 4, 6, 8, 11), her daughter (14:6, 7, 8, 9, 11) and the very guests he has invited to his dinner. Ironically, it is precisely Herod's extravagant oath, the oath of a 'powerful' man, which reveals instead his fundamental weakness.

Power of command

The story of Herod the king (2:1–23) reveals a comparable truth. Herod wields a power of command that brings people into his presence (2:4, 7), sends them out (2:8, 16) and spells out death and destruction for many innocent victims (2:16). But with all his power of command Herod cannot save himself from being outmanoeuvred and overpowered by the 'angel of the Lord', who, unbeknown to Herod, persistently foils his every effort to 'seek the child's life' (2:20) in order to 'destroy' him (2:13). At every point where the child's life is threatened, the angel of the Lord intervenes through the medium of 'dreams' to rescue the child from the threat at hand (2:12, 13, 22; *cf.* 2:19). In the end Herod not only proves himself incapable of achieving his key political goal, i.e. to 'destroy' the child (*cf.* 2:19–23), but in a deeply ironic turn of events Herod himself 'dies' instead of the child he has been seeking to 'destroy' (2:19, 20). Herod's power of command proves useless in furthering his political aims.

Public relations initiatives

The Jewish leaders, who take all their actions in order to 'show' others their piety (6:16a) and to be 'seen' (6:5a) and 'praised' (6:2a) for their 'righteous deeds' (6:1: DJW), ultimately find their actions no more effective than those of Herod the king (2:1–23) and Herod the tetrarch (14:1–12). While they clearly receive the momentary public praise and approval that they are seeking ('Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward': 6:2b, 5b, 16b), they do not receive the ultimate approbation of the Jewish crowds. Instead the crowds recognise that Jesus has an 'authority' (ἐξουσία) that the Jewish 'scribes' do not have (7:29; 9:8); and they are 'astounded' by Jesus' teaching (ἐκπλήσσω: 7:28; 22:33) and 'amazed' by his healing ministry (θαυμάζω: 9:33; 15:31; *cf.* φοβέομαι: 9:8; ἐξίστημι: 12:23). Consequently large Jewish crowds 'follow' Jesus around the Galilean countryside[85] and they swarm around Jesus as he enters Jerusalem and heals and teaches in the temple.[86] They 'glorify God' on Jesus' account (δοξάζω: 9:8). They acclaim Jesus' deeds as unique in Israel: 'Never has anything like this been seen in Israel' (9:33). They hail Jesus as the 'Son of David' and 'the one who comes in the name of the Lord' (21:9). They proclaim him as 'the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee' (21:11; *cf.* 21:46). Clearly, in spite of all their best efforts at public relations, the Jewish leadership is totally ineffective for much of Matthew's narrative at winning over the hearts and minds of the Jewish crowds, while their opponent Jesus, to the contrary, is highly popular among the people.

Pilate's efforts at winning over Jewish hearts and minds do not prove any more effective. Instead the public relations initiative that Pilate instigates in order to win the approval of the Jewish crowds at Passover (27:15) leads only to a noisy debate with the crowds (27:20–23) and the outbreak of a politically dangerous 'riot' (27:24). Therefore, as both Jewish and Roman leaders discover to their dismay, first-century 'photo-ops' prove largely ineffective *vis-à-vis* the crowds.

Political expedience

If the lavish lifestyle of the politically powerful highlights (on the surface at least) the apparent success of their political endeavours, political expedience, by contrast, points to the undeniable failure of their political efforts. The very concept of 'political expedience' implies by definition that the political operatives in question are forced by political exigencies beyond their control to do that which they would otherwise not do. Herod the tetrarch is 'grieved' at the request of Herodias' daughter (14:9a), but sees no political alternative to executing John the Baptist (14:9b). The chief priests and the elders of the people, for their part, are clearly seeking to trap Jesus when they accost him with their question about his 'authority' (21:23). But instead they themselves are effectively trapped ('We do not know': 21:27) by Jesus' counter question, which they find too politically dangerous to answer in definitive terms one way (21:25) or the other (21:26). In similar fashion the chief priests and the Pharisees find themselves incapable of 'arresting' Jesus when he tells a story against them, due to their political fear of the Jewish crowds (21:45–46). Pilate, for his part, finds himself forced by the political danger of 'rioting' crowds (27:24) to execute a prisoner whom he knows to be innocent (27:19a, 23a) and whom he knows has been brought to trial for spurious reasons (27:18).

Whether these political leaders are ultimately effective in staving off the 'sudden political death' that they fear is a question that Matthew answers variously or not at all. Herod the tetrarch disappears from the narrative abruptly after Matthew 14:1–12, with no further indication of his political success or failure. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem ultimately succeed in winning over the Jewish crowd to their viewpoint (27:20–23, 25). Pilate, for his part, staves off a political 'riot' by a symbolic 'hand washing' (27:24–25), only to discover that the 'Jesus case' refuses to disappear from his docket (27:62–66). Pilate, the Roman governor, may ultimately find himself manipulated by his Jewish subjects and 'persuaded' (28:14, DJW: read 'bribed') into excusing a serious failure on the job by a military guard under his control. As Matthew portrays it, political expedience is clear evidence of political failure both going and (frequently) coming.

Campaign rhetoric

As noted above, the Jewish leaders depicted throughout Matthew's narrative find that their public relations initiatives are not effective in winning the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. They likewise make the same discovery with regard to their relentless campaign rhetoric against Jesus. Throughout Matthew's narrative the Jewish leaders trail Jesus doggedly, raising countless questions and objections and denouncing Jesus

85. Thus ἀκολουθέω: 4:25; 8:1, 12:15; 14:13; 19:2; 20:29. *cf.* 5:1; 8:18; 9:36; 14:14, where Jesus 'sees' the crowds who have gathered around him.

86. Thus 21:9, where crowds likewise 'go ahead' of Jesus (προάγω) and 'follow' him (ἀκολουθέω), on his entry into Jerusalem. See also 21:14–15, 46; 23:1.

publicly whenever possible.[87] But no matter how often they speak or how loudly they denounce Jesus, they fail consistently in their efforts to defeat Jesus in public debate. For every challenge or question that they bring forward and for every 'trap' that they set, Jesus responds with words that they can neither answer nor refute.[88] Jesus' word is invariably the last word spoken, with the exception of conspiratorial threats muttered by the Jewish leaders among themselves (*cf.* 9:14; 21:45–46). Not once does Matthew offer the Jewish leaders the opportunity to get the last word in debate with Jesus. Jesus' last direct word to them, a scriptural conundrum (22:41–45), is a question that silences them completely (22:46): 'No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions'. If the Jewish leaders are, as it appears, waging a political campaign against Jesus, this campaign is, until very late in the narrative (27:20), spectacularly ineffective in achieving positive results.

Public lies and political deception

As Matthew indicates, both Roman imperial powers (2:8; *cf.* 2:16) and Jewish leaders (28:12–15; *cf.* 28:11) engage in the dissemination of public lies. Their efforts are likewise depicted as partially or wholly successful. Herod the king succeeds, without apparent difficulty, in persuading the wise men to 'set out for Bethlehem' (2:9) on his behest under what the reader surmises to be false premises, Herod's supposed interest in 'paying [the child] homage' (2:8). The Roman guard, in collaboration with the Jewish chief priests and elders, disseminate a false story about the empty tomb of Jesus (28:12–15a), which maintains currency within the Jewish community up until Matthew's own day (28:15b). Clearly one can deceive all of the people (i.e. the wise men) some of the time or some of the people (i.e. 'the Jews') all of the time.

But even here Matthew points in ironic fashion to the ultimate ineffectiveness of political deception as a strategy for political success. Herod the king, who thinks that he has successfully deceived the wise men into aiding him in his nefarious scheme to 'destroy' the child (2:8; *cf.* 2:13), has no notion that the 'angel of the Lord' is about to undo his secretive efforts and communicate the ugly truth (2:13; *cf.* 2:12). Herod's efforts at deception are ultimately ineffective due to divine intervention of which Herod knows nothing. In Matthew's perspective God wills the truth to become public; and Herod can do nothing to prevent that from happening.

Matthew works differently, however, with the false message concerning Jesus' empty tomb (28:11–15). Here it is the worldwide proclamation of Jesus' own disciples (28:19–20) that puts the deceptive 'story told among the Jews' (28:15b) in cosmic perspective and undercuts the ultimate impact of this blatant attempt at public deception. While the Jewish leaders' fabrication concerning the body of Jesus is still being passed on as truth in Matthew's own day, this false story is reaching 'the Jews' alone (28:15b). By contrast the true message of the Risen Jesus is making its way to 'all the nations', including the Jews,[89] and creating a worldwide fellowship of disciples of Jesus,[90] of whom Matthew's own church is merely one small expression. In the narrative rhetoric of Matthew's Gospel public lies and political deception have no ultimate recourse against the will and the power of God to make the truth known.

87. Thus 9:2–8, 10–13; 12:1–8, 9–14, 22–37, 38–45; 15:1–9; 16:1–4; 19:3–9; 21:14–16, 23–27; 22:15–22, 23–33, 34–40; *cf.* 22:41–46.

88. *cf.* the texts listed in Weaver (1992:398–402) to identify the questions posed and the answers given. There is no room in an article of this length to spell out the specifics of this wide-ranging debate.

89. The climactic location of this saying of the risen Jesus within the Gospel, the cosmic authority of the risen Jesus, and the inclusively phrased formulation πάντα τὰ ἔθνη point to Matthew's intention to make an all-inclusive statement here (24:9, 14).

90. *cf.* 24:14: 'And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ) to all the nations (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν)'.

Conspiracy to destroy political enemies

Matthew's narrative leaves no room for doubt concerning the significant power of conspiracies aimed at destroying political enemies. As becomes apparent throughout Matthew's story, such conspiracies can foment enormous evil in the world. Herodias, who is conspiring against the one child that he fears (2:13), carries out a brutal massacre in Bethlehem (2:16) that leaves countless mothers bereft of their young children (2:17–18). John the Baptist loses his head due to the successful conspiracy of Herodias, the consort of Herod the tetrarch (14:8). The 'tenants' to whom Jesus' allegorical 'landowner' has 'leased' his 'vineyard' succeed in executing the brutal murder (21:39) that they have conspired to carry out (21:38). The Jewish leaders are likewise successful in procuring the death of Jesus (27:24–26) by means of an entire web of conspiracies (12:14; 21:46; 26:14–16; 27:1–2, 20).

But within Matthew's narrative the political strategy of conspiracy to destroy one's enemies ultimately proves itself no more effective than that of public lies and political deception. Matthew's narrative rhetoric more often than not mocks those who conspire to do evil and depicts the ultimate ineffectiveness of their efforts. Herod the king, who seeks to 'destroy' the child (2:13; *cf.* 2:20) is incapable not only of achieving his own goal (2:21–23) but also of saving his own life (2:19). The Jewish leaders who conspire to 'entrap' Jesus in his words (22:15) find themselves totally incapable of defeating Jesus in public debate (*cf.* 22:46).[91] The 'tenants' of Jesus' parable, who conspire to 'get the inheritance' of the vineyard by 'killing the heir' (21:38–39), discover instead that they themselves are about to face a 'miserable death' (21:41a) and lose their stake in the vineyard altogether (21:41b). The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, for their part, clearly intend their conspiracy against Jesus to be cloaked in secrecy: 'And they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him' (26:4). But in fact Jesus has long known and spoken of their evil intentions (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:18–19). The 'stealthy' plans that the Jewish leaders lay for arresting Jesus and killing him (26:3–5) are, unbeknown to the Jewish leaders themselves, no secret at all, since Jesus has just announced them, for the fourth and last time, to his disciples (26:1–2). The conspiracy of the Jewish leaders to cover up the news of Jesus' resurrection maintains currency 'among the Jews' alone (28:15b), while Jesus' disciples carry word of the Risen Jesus to 'all nations' (28:19). Conspiracy, in Matthew's estimation, is ultimately a political strategy of dubious effectiveness.

Subversion of justice

In Matthew's narrative, both Jewish and Roman political leaders clearly engage in subversion of justice, whether by prior conspiracy (26:3–5), or due to political expedience (27:24–26). There can be no doubt about the effectiveness of the Jewish and Roman powers in achieving such subversion of justice, whether or not this is their stated goal. The Jewish leaders 'conspire' against Jesus in advance (26:3–5, 14–16; *cf.* 27:1–2), arrest him by 'stealth' (26:4, 55), seek 'false testimony' against him at trial (26:59) and condemn Jesus on a charge of 'blasphemy' that they fail to recognise as false (26:65–66). Therefore, the Jewish leaders clearly succeed in subverting justice as they put Jesus on trial. Pilate, in turn, subverts justice by first handing over his judicial authority to the Jewish crowd (27:15–18) and then responding in politically expedient fashion when he is backed into a corner by the 'riot' that breaks out (27:24–26; *cf.* 27:20–23). In Matthew's view both the Jewish leaders and Pilate are equally effective in subverting the respective judicial systems over which they preside.

At the same time, however, Jesus himself makes it clear in advance that both Jewish and Roman leaders are able to carry out their subversion of justice precisely because their actions, completely unbeknown to them, fulfil a divine mandate for the life of Jesus in which he 'must (δεῖ) go to Jerusalem and undergo

91. See the discussion above concerning campaign rhetoric.

great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed' (16:21; *cf.* 17:12, 22–23; 20:18–19; 26:2). Accordingly, when Peter challenges this divine mandate, Jesus charges Peter with failure to 'set his mind on divine things' (τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ: 16:23). In Gethsemane Jesus once again confirms this divine mandate as he identifies the reason for his arrest (26:56): 'But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled'. Therefore even when the Jewish and Roman leaders succeed in what they believe to be their own designs to subvert justice and achieve their political goals, Matthew portrays these leaders in ironic fashion as unknowing actors in God's own divinely initiated plan to 'save his people from their sins' (1:21) through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is in truth 'the Messiah, the Son of God' (26:63; *cf.* 27:40, 43, 54).

The politics of violence

The ultimate power that the political leaders of Matthew's narrative can wield is the power of violence, reflected in the arrest, mockery, torture and death of their victims. This power is genuine and fearsome. Herod the king (2:1–23) carries out a brutal massacre of young children in Bethlehem (2:16), leaving the mothers of Bethlehem (and no doubt the fathers as well) in deep grief (2:17–18). Herod the tetrarch (14:1–12) arrests, incarcerates and finally decapitates John the Baptist (14:1–11), leaving his disciples to bury the body and report the grim news to John's successor, Jesus (14:12). Jesus himself is arrested by his Jewish opponents (26:47–56), tried before Jewish and Roman judiciaries (26:57–66; 27:11–26a), mocked and tortured by Jewish and Roman captors alike (26:67–68; 27:26b–31) and executed by crucifixion on a Roman cross between two common criminals (27:32–38). Jesus warns his disciples that they too will encounter violent treatment from their own opponents in future (5:10–11; 10:16–23; 23:34, 37; 24:9–14), just as the prophets and righteous people before them have likewise suffered (5:12; 17:9–13; 23:29–31, 35). There can be no question that the Jewish and Roman leaders of Matthew's narrative wield violent power of major proportions.

But the power of violence, as genuine and fearsome as it may be, has distinct limits. Matthew's ironic caricatures of the Jewish and Roman powerbrokers of his narrative come to their climax as Matthew mocks the violent power that they wield and robs it ironically of its potency. Those who mock and torture Jesus in fact do nothing more than proclaim his true identity loudly through their words (26:67–68; 27:29, 41–43) and visibly through their actions (27:28–30). As they announce publicly in their own mocking words, Jesus is indeed 'Messiah' (26:68), 'King of the Jews/[Israel]' (27:29, 42) and 'Son of God' (27:43).[92]

Those who employ the power of violence to kill their victims find their power of life and death to be ultimately ineffective. Herod the king, who seeks to 'destroy' the child (2:13), loses his own life instead (2:19, 20), while the once-threatened child ends up alive and well in Nazareth (2:23). Herod the tetrarch succeeds in killing John the Baptist (14:3–12) only to discover, as he believes, that his nemesis has now 'been raised from the dead' with accordingly mighty 'powers ... at work in him' (14:1–2; *cf.* 13:58). For the Jewish leaders, who successfully accomplish their political goal to bring about the death of Jesus (26:3–5; 27:1–2) and who ensure this political victory by setting a 'guard' and 'sealing the stone' in front of Jesus' tomb (27:66), Matthew spares no irony. Not only does the 'angel of the Lord' commandeer the stone guarding the tomb, 'rolling it back' and 'sitting on it' (28:2), but in a narrative move ironic to the core Matthew informs his readers that those who have been guarding the dead body of Jesus 'shake' at the sight of the angel and themselves 'become like dead men' (28:4). The Jewish leaders who have the power to orchestrate Jesus' death are, at the same time, powerless to keep Jesus dead and buried (28:11–15). Those who exercise the deadly power of violence find themselves massively out-manoeuvred by divine initiative (28:1–4) and totally impotent *vis-à-vis* the power and the will of God to bring the dead to life (28:1–10, 16–20; Weaver 1992:398–402). Clearly, from Matthew's perspective, the exercise of violence as a political strategy is profoundly limited in its effectiveness.

92. *cf.* 21:38, where the vineyard tenants in their own words proclaim the son of the vineyard owner as the 'heir' (κληρονόμος) to the vineyard.

Failed leadership

As the evidence indicates, the deep-rooted irony of Matthew's portrayal of the political leadership exercised by the Jewish and Roman powerbrokers within his narrative lies in a twofold failure on their part. On the one hand these political leaders fail to act with integrity in the execution of their legitimately assigned leadership roles. Roman imperial leaders exercise their power by 'lording it over others' and acting as 'tyrants' (20:25). They achieve their political goals more often than not by suppressing justice (27:18, 19, 23, 24–26) and employing deadly violence against innocent people (*cf.* 2:13–23; 14:1–12; 27:31b–38). Jewish leaders, for their part, show themselves to be 'hypocrites', who 'do not practice what they teach' (23:3) and who live pious lives not out of concern for 'mercy' (9:13; 12:7; 23:23) but rather out of the self-aggrandising desire for public recognition and praise (23: 5–7). They likewise fail to live out the intermediary role between God and the people to which they have been called as leaders (27:3–4; 41–46). Instead they effectively abandon their charge and leave the people 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36).

But this is not the extent of their failure, as Matthew makes vividly clear through his narrative rhetoric. If the political leaders of Matthew's narrative fail in the execution of their legitimately assigned tasks, they likewise fail, demonstrably and ironically, in the execution of their own nefarious schemes and misguided political initiatives. While they do indeed have the power to effect real evil in the real world (2:16; 14:1–12), their power is ultimately far more limited than they ever imagine (see 'Rulers, great ones and vineyard tenants: A Matthean portrait of political power' above). The evil that they instigate through their political initiatives is at most penultimate in its impact[93] and in the end completely impotent *vis-à-vis* the genuine and overwhelming power of God (28:11–15; *cf.* 28:1–10/16–20). In the end the political leaders of Matthew's narrative, both Jewish and Roman, demonstrate profound and ironic failure in their exercise of political power – both in their sins of *omission* and in their sins of *commission* – even as they exercise the considerable power of their respective offices. Through this ironic portrait of the exercise of political power within the world of his narrative Matthew issues a sharp and unmistakable challenge to the powerbrokers of his own world, and by centuries of extension, to the powerbrokers of our world as well.

'IT WILL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU': TOWARD A MATTHEAN MODEL FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

In the above discussion I have sketched out Matthew's wide-ranging critique of the political leadership exercised by the Jewish and Roman powerbrokers within his narrative. To sketch out Matthew's contrasting portrait of positive political leadership would require an equally wide-ranging study of the character of leadership exhibited by Jesus and the characters associated with him (the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples). But such a task lies well beyond the scope of the current article and begs for further attention in a follow-up study. Here I offer merely a few basic pointers toward the thematic of such a study.

A primary question for consideration concerns the underlying vision or calling that gives character to the political leadership exercised by Jesus within Matthew's narrative. This question

93. *cf.* 10:28, where Jesus challenges his disciples, 'Do not fear those who kill the body (τὸ σῶμα) but cannot kill the soul (τὴν ψυχήν)'.

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focuses, accordingly, on the central characteristics of the 'kingdom of heaven' and the associated character portrait of God, the ruler of this domain. This question also includes attention to the specific 'calling' of Jesus as reflected in the Matthean accounts of his baptism, temptations and transfiguration.

A second question for consideration concerns the demonstrated character of Jesus' political leadership patterns within Matthew's narrative. This question includes attention to Jesus' basic leadership strategy of appointing and training disciples, to the overall character of Jesus' healing ministry and to such central motifs of Jesus' teaching ministry as 'love of God and neighbour', 'compassion'/'mercy', 'servant leadership' and Jesus' rejection of violence by himself or his followers as an acceptable 'modus operandi' within the 'kingdom of heaven'.

A third question for consideration concerns the demonstrated effectiveness and/or impact of Jesus' political leadership patterns as narrated within Matthew's story. This question includes attention to the specific effectiveness/impact of Jesus' 'disciple-making' strategy as well as to the ultimate effectiveness/impact of Jesus' overall mission within the Jewish/Gentile community depicted in Matthew's narrative.

CONCLUSION: 'ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD'

As becomes clear from a search of the evidence, the narrative rhetoric of Matthew's Gospel pronounces sharp and uncompromising judgement on the political powerbrokers within Matthew's narrative, both Jewish and Roman. In the face of this potent political critique, what then does it mean for us to read Matthew's Gospel in our own world? How does Matthew's narrative rhetoric assist us in reflecting on the exercise of political power within our 21st century global village? Here I have neither time nor space to offer more than a biblical handful (seven!) of very basic observations that point toward the discussion that must take place among all those who read Matthew's Gospel as Scripture.

- Within the 'kingdoms of the world' political power is regularly put to use for evil purposes. Matthew's narrative rhetoric confirms for us what we already know from our own 21st century world of experiences.
- The task of Jesus' followers in response to abuse of power is the urgent and dangerous political task of speaking truth to and about the powerbrokers of the world. What John the Baptist and Jesus show us, among other things, is the courageous witness of those who directly address the abuses of the leadership of their day (14:1–12; 23:1–39).
- The followers of Jesus will suffer for daring to speak truth to power. People can get killed for such audacity. John the Baptist and Jesus are prime examples of such people (14:1–12; 26:1–27:54).
- Jesus' followers are called to respond in non-violent fashion as they encounter suffering. Jesus himself sets the example for them (26:47–56) and calls them in turn to 'love (their) enemies' (5:44) and 'not to resist' those who are 'evil' (5:39).
- Justice belongs to God. It is the task of God, and not that of the followers of Jesus, to redress the wrongs of history (21:33–46; 22:1–10; 28:1–20).
- The 'kingdoms of the world' have far less power than they (and we!) imagine they do. Witness the ways identified above in which such powers fail at their own evil tasks.
- God's resurrection power trumps all human powers. And God's resurrection power always has the last word. The story of Jesus' resurrection (28:1–20) is God's last laugh (Ps 2:4; *cf*. 2:1–3) at all the pretensions of human power.

I conclude my study with a personal journal reflection on the exercise of political power, a story recounted in the spring of 1996, as I was a visiting scholar at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, right up the hill from the Israeli military checkpoint leading to Bethlehem. This story speaks of words from John's Apocalypse But this story could just as well speak of the words of Matthew's narrative:

April 7, 1996, Tantur. Saturday evening was the Easter Vigil at St Anne's Church, just inside the Lion's Gate. It was well into Easter Sunday morning before we got home and got to bed! But there was not much 'rest for the weary'! Jennifer had planned an Easter sunrise service to be held on the roof, that amazing vantage point from which we can not only look over to the mountains of Moab in Jordan, just across the Jordan Valley, but also and much more closely, directly down into the Israeli checkpoint on Hebron Road, just below Tantur! This was the place our service needed to be! We needed to claim and proclaim the Resurrection right here on this border location, with the signs of the military occupation both visible and audible just down below! It was a lovely service, very simple and reflective, with scriptures and recorded music and time for reflection. The sun came up beautifully and passed through a tiny 'slit' between the earth and the cloudbank above it. But the most powerful moment of all came at the end of the service. As the last piece of music Jennifer had chosen the Hallelujah Chorus. There it was, right up above the checkpoint, that most visible sign of present oppression and occupation and military might, *there it was*, this incredible, powerful declaration about 'the Lord God Omnipotent who shall reign for ever and ever' and 'the kingdom of this world which has (already!) become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ'! I stood at the railing and looked down into the checkpoint and simply exulted in the wonder of it all! What an enormous gift and what a powerful word of courage!

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