

Jesus the Teacher and Stoic Ethics in the Gospel of Matthew

Stanley Stowers
Brown University

I do not think that the author of the Gospel of Matthew was a Stoic, but I do think that the writer freely adapted elements of Stoic thought in creating his picture of Jesus the moral teacher. This holds especially for the so-called Sermon on the Mount, but may apply more broadly. I have arrived at this conclusion by asking what is distinctive about Matthew's depiction of Jesus as a teacher of ethics.

It will be helpful to review what are taken as basic facts in gospel studies and studies of the earliest traditions about Jesus. In the earliest sources, the only sources that precede and are not definitively shaped by the Roman destruction of the Judean temple and Jerusalem, one cannot even determine that Jesus was a teacher of ethics.¹ If Paul knew that Jesus was such a teacher, he does not use either the teachings or the idea that Jesus was a teacher, even though the teachings from the later Mathew and Luke would be very relevant and overlap with his own teachings. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches, but those teachings are about himself (e. g., "I am the light of the world"; 8:12) and there

¹ Paul's letters do have two "commands of the Lord" (1 Cor 7:10; 9:14), but 1 Thess 4:15 and other considerations make it likely that these were prophetic commands of the risen Lord. Even if Paul is referring to the historical Jesus, they do not provide enough of a picture to determine that Jesus was a great teacher rather than one who had given a few pronouncements. One cannot rule out that Jesus' teachings about divorce in the synoptic gospels came from Paul's comment.

are no teachings that might be considered broadly moral teachings beyond the saying that his disciples should love one another (Jn 15:12). This brings us to Matthew's primary source, the Gospel of Mark that Matthew almost entirely reproduces as a basis for his own major additions and transformations. Mark presents Jesus as a teacher of mysterious teachings about the coming kingdom of God, a mystery so obscure that none of Jesus' disciples are able to understand it. Jesus in Mark is about as remote from a guide about how one ought live day to day as one can imagine. Luke's, and above all, Matthew's idea that Jesus was centrally a great ethical teacher, offering definitive interpretation of Jewish scripture, owes something, perhaps much, to their use of the sayings source Q. The question of what Q was and whether it preserves quite early materials is a set of issues that is best to bracket here. But clearly the author of Matthew exploited Q in the process of developing its distinctive portrait of Jesus' moral teachings. Even with the debt to Q however, what is distinctive about the ethical teachings of Jesus in Matthew clearly belongs to that writer and appears in additions to and reinterpretations of Q and Mark.

A "Stoic reading" of Matthew could easily be a monograph. At the risk of being superficial, I will limit the study to a few of the most distinctive ideas: the idea of a universal ethic for individuals based on divine law; the demand for perfection; the so-called criterion of "interiority" or "intention."² If the logic of these notions does indeed have a Stoic inspiration, however, it will be difficult to isolate these from other moral

² The subject calls for the kind of detailed research that Erin Roberts is conducting at Brown University on emotion in Matthew.

concepts. Stoicism is and was famous for its systematic coherency, even if many critics charged that its central notions were counter intuitive and its demands impractical.

Jesus' teachings in Matthew present themselves as an interpretation of Judean law that authoritatively reveals its true meaning. Stoic thought presented its ethical theory as the universal law of Zeus or God. I suggest that this conjunction of ethics and law in Stoic thought made it congenial for the writer of this gospel to attribute his Stoically inflected teachings to Jesus the Judean sage. Although New Testament scholarship describes Stoicism as pantheistic, it was a combination of theism and pantheism.³ God is both the active organizing principle of the universe and the mind that is the author and administrator of each cycle of the universe. It denied that God had a human-like form, but accommodated traditional Greek thought about Zeus and the gods as symbolic. My point is not that Matthew adopted Stoic conceptions of the divine, but only that there was enough similarity between Stoic and Judean conceptions – the latter being extremely diverse and untheorized – that a Judean thinker could find adapting some Stoic thought to his own purposes possible and congenial. And this is exactly what we find other Jewish writers doing, most notably Philo and the author of the *Wisdom of Solomon*. The Stoic interpretation of divine law as ethics and ethics as the will of Zeus aids in understanding a feature of Matthew and the other Jewish writers: Although moral teachings occupy only a small amount of the legal material in the “Books of Moses,” and much more is cultic, treats holy war and so-on, these writers treat scriptural law as virtually the equivalent of ethics.

³ For a good recent discussion of Stoic theology with bibliography, see Long 2002, 142-79; Thom 2005.

Cleanthes' famous Hymn to Zeus that a number of scholars have compared to the Lord's Prayer spoke of Zeus as "first cause and ruler of nature, governing everything with your law."⁴ Moreover, "it is right for all mortals to address you: for we have our origin in you, bearing a likeness to God." After praising God's kingly rational rule of the universe, the hymn turns to human rebellion: "This all mortals that are bad flee and avoid, the wretched, who though always desiring to acquire good things, neither see nor hear God's universal law, obeying which they could have a good life with understanding." Instead these people pursue glory, wealth and indulgence in pleasure (24-29). Cleanthes prays for Zeus to "deliver human beings from their destructive ignorance" (33). Replace "Zeus" with "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" and Mathew agrees with all of this, including the emphasis on understanding. The law is a manifestation of divine wisdom and Jesus an embodiment.⁵

The law that humans ought to follow in their actions (and feelings) and that the sage always obeys are not laws of a set code like that of the laws of cities and peoples. Rather, obeying this law is following right reason in each circumstance of life as willed by Zeus.⁶ So how might a Jewish writer relate Judean law to Stoic thought about divine law? One could do this by borrowing from Stoicism a structure that distinguished and related the common ordinary human law and morality manifested in particular societies

⁴ Trans. is from Thom 2005. On the hymn and the Lord's Prayer, see Thom 2001, 493-95.

⁵ Much has been written on this. A standard has been Suggs 1970, although he may have overstated his case.

⁶ A now classic discussion of this Stoic theory is Inwood 1985.

from the conditions of character required for obeying those laws correctly. This distinction appears in the concepts of the *kathekonta*, variously translated as proper or natural functions, appropriate actions, the befitting and so on, and the *katorthomata*, right or perfect actions.⁷ Everything that a sage does is an appropriate action and a perfect action, but non-sages who are all wicked and fools perform appropriate actions depending upon their degree of progress toward virtue (= wisdom). They never perform a perfect action. So, for example, the ordinary person and the sage might both perform exactly the same external act in honoring parents, but the action of non-sage will be vicious and the action of the sage virtuous. The difference is that the sage performs the act from a virtuous or wise character. The act is thus qualitatively different. Merely performing the right action does not suffice for moral goodness and for obeying the commands of God. The right action must be performed in the right way, meaning with the right disposition of character.

Especially later Stoics and those of the Roman period emphasized that the *kathekonta* corresponded to what was commonly agreed upon across the laws and moral codes of human cultures. All the things that cultures agreed upon as actions and habits of good people were appropriate acts because that agreement reflected natural human moral development. Thus Cicero's *De Officiis* – *officiis* being his translation for *kathekonta* – is based on the Stoic Panaetius' *Concerning Appropriate Acts*, but highly adapted to Roman moral sensibilities and featuring *praecepta*, moral rules. Both Philo and Paul know the

⁷ An appropriate action or proper function is a condition or behavior that is natural to a plant or animal and is rational in that sense, even if only the perfected human follows right reason..

term *ta kathekonta* and use the concept for moral teachings from the law such as indicated in the Ten Commandments.⁸

This, however, is not the whole story, ultimately there is only one way to know what is the right thing to do in a particular circumstance or what Zeus requires, consult a sage. According to circumstances, the sage might even go against what convention and local law deemed to be appropriate actions in order to perform an appropriate and perfect action. The sage's action, obedient to reason/Zeus, ultimately defines what constitutes a perfectly appropriate action in any particular circumstance.⁹ Moral authority on this view requires a perfect moral expert. Only the sage, then, stands as an authoritative interpreter of these common norms, codes and local laws. This made the sage into a rather formal concept for ethical thinking since Stoics doubted that a sage had ever lived or thought that perhaps one or two had existed, perhaps Socrates, Heracles or the earliest humans. Philo of Alexandria makes Moses into such an authority, a sage who embodies the law. I suggest that Matthew's Jesus who unlike the traditional Judean experts on the law interprets the law with total authority and embodies God's own wisdom is a figure shaped by the Stoic idea of the sage. Of course there are also many non-Stoic elements in Matthew's Jesus including the Jesus of Mark that Matthew had inherited and had to accommodate.¹⁰

⁸ e. g., Philo, *On the Cherubim*, 14-15; Paul, Rom 1:28.

⁹ Brennan 2005, 191-94.

¹⁰ Some caution is due here. Stoicism and the figure of the sage was so pervasive in the Eastern Mediterranean that in a more general way than for which I am arguing regarding

Because Stoic ethics began with the idea of common ordinary morals natural to humans as a foundation for complete human development, Stoics used the language of “the perfect” and “perfection” when they talked about that full potential for humans. Archedemus from the second century BCE even formulated the human end as “to perfect all appropriate actions in one’s life.”¹¹ Stoics defined the kind of action that a sage performed, a *katorthoma*, as a perfectly appropriate action (*teleion kathekon*).¹² Discussion of Matthew’s use of perfection will also, I believe, clarify the Stoic conception.

Matthew 5:48 makes a good place to begin: “Therefore you be perfect (*teleioi*) as your heavenly father is perfect (*teleios*).”¹³ The idea that humans ought to be morally perfect and have a kind of perfection that they share with the divine is odd and at odds with Jewish traditions that posit a great difference between God and humans.¹⁴ The contradiction to normal Jewish, and I would argue, human moral thought more generally, has often been seen as a puzzle. That this counter intuitiveness comes from Stoic theory is suggested by the structure of thought in much of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew this thought may have or was even likely to have already shaped the picture of Jesus in Q and Mark.

¹¹ D. L. 7.88.

¹² D. L. 7.107; Arius Didymus in Stobaeus 2.85.

¹³ I see no good reason for construing *esesthe* as a future rather than an imperative.

¹⁴ The image of God motif in Jewish traditions though, could conceivably be interpreted in a Stoic fashion with humans sharing God’s reason.

What God requires for righteousness is not simply the performance of actions that in themselves are generally accepted as morally good, but rather that such actions be done with the right moral disposition that is the equivalent doing God's will.¹⁵ That in having the right disposition (based on wisdom), the sage was like God and imitating Zeus was basic to Stoic thought. Stoicism had only two categories of people, sages who were perfect and non-sages who were all wicked and foolish. Those who do what Jesus teaches will become like a wise man, a sage, whose good is indestructible (7:24).¹⁶ Matthew adds this statement as an explanation of the story of the builder taken from Q so that Luke (6:46-49) tells it without the reference to the wise man. Jesus as depicted in the Sermon on the Mount not only calls for perfection, but treats those whom he addresses with his teachings as wicked (7:11): "If you then who are wicked (*poneroi*) know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good things to those who ask him." The next verse connects this perfection to the law:

"Whatever you want people to do to you, do also to them; for this is the law and the

¹⁵ So, for instance, Matthew adds 7:21-23 to the following material (24-27) that it shares with Luke. What they share teaches the lesson that one must actually do what Jesus teaches, but 21-23 adds a different and more radical notion that even seemingly good actions, including miracles of the kingdom of God are wicked unless they are a result of doing the will of God. But what could that be if not doing things that clearly are a result of God's power? They must also be done righteously, a matter of a particular quality of character. Not even the ability to perform a miracle guarantees righteousness.

¹⁶ The word is *phronimos*, a word used by Stoic writers as a synonym for *sophos* (*SVF* 3.157-58) and Long 2002, 37.

prophets.” But there are few who are virtuous: The wide road leads to destruction and few make it on the hard road through the narrow gate (7:13). Earlier Jesus had said that he had not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it (5:17-20). Every bit of it must be done. A person cannot enter the kingdom from heaven unless he or she possess righteousness that “excessively exceeds” that of the recognized moral and religious exemplars, the scribes and the Pharisees (5:20). The pleonasm, I suggest, indicates that the righteousness of which Matthew speaks is to be understood qualitatively and in a way similar to virtue or wisdom in Stoicism. The scribes and the Pharisees can do everything that the law requires and not be righteous. Righteousness is a particular qualitative state of the soul.

At first, the story of the rich young man in 19:16-22 might seem to belie this conclusion: If the man just keeps one more commandment, he will be perfect. Acquiring perfection seems to be incremental.

Teacher, what good should I do so that I might have eternal life. He said to him, Why do you ask me about the good? The good is one. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments. He said to him, which ones? Jesus said, you shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not witness falsely; honor your father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, I have kept all of these things. What do I still lack? Jesus said to him, If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give them to the poor, and you will have a treasure in the heavens, and come follow me. When the young man heard the reasoning (or word/speech), he went away grieving because he had many possessions.

Matthew bases the story on Mark 10:17-31, but shapes it according to his own agenda including the addition of Jesus' words about becoming perfect and appending the commandment to love the neighbor (Lev 19:18). In Mark, instead of asking what the good is that he must do, the man (not a "young man") runs up, kneels before Jesus and calls him "good teacher."¹⁷ Jesus rebukes him and says that only God is good. The verse together with the versions in Matthew and Luke caused fits for theologians in the fourth and fifth centuries who were inventing the orthodox Christological and Trinitarian doctrines. But Matthew is unaware of any of these issues.

Rather, he has reshaped Mark in a way that echoes the structure of Stoic thought about value and moral development. A fragment preserved in Stobaeus (5.906,18-907,5; *SVF* 3.510; trans. LS 59 J) makes a good point of departure for analysis: "Chrysippus says, 'The man who progresses to the furthest point performs all proper functions without exception and omits none. Yet his life,' he says, 'is not yet happy, but happiness supervenes on it when these intermediate actions acquire the additional properties of firmness and tenor and their own particular fixity.'" The person who has made the furthest progress toward wisdom/happiness/virtue will be doing all of the appropriate actions, exactly the things and kinds of things that Jesus lists, and still not be wise, happy or good. Jesus' call for the young man to give up his possessions is not a call to keep yet another commandment. There is no such commandment. Rather, it is like a Socratic bit of questioning. The challenge reveals that the young man does not possess the

¹⁷ Matthew's "young man" clearly seems also to be a play of contrast on "perfect" as in mature.

good/wisdom/happiness that Matthew calls righteousness even if he does all of the expected righteous acts.

A Stoic would analyze the situation like this. Outwardly the young man does all of the things that a wise or righteous person does, but his system of values does not cohere into the qualitative whole (i. e., Chrysippus' firmness, tenor and fixity). The man's constitution is so structured that he thinks that wealth is a good rather than an indifferent that the sage will skillfully deploy depending upon circumstances with virtues such as justice and love of others. The young man does not understand that if he loses or gives away the wealth it will not affect his goodness, happiness or wisdom.

Attention to Matthew's use of Mark shows the moral structure of the former's reshaping. Commentators assimilate Matthew's "the good is one" to Mark's (and Luke's who follows Mark) "No one is good except God." But why would Matthew who is notorious for trying to explain and make Mark clear, change the unambiguous reference to God into "the good is one" or even "the good is One" ("one" is *eis*, a masculine)? Furthermore, Matthew changes the issue from one about Jesus being good, to a question about the nature of good in a moral and legal sense. I tentatively suggest that Matthew's changes refer to the Stoic doctrine of the unity of virtue.¹⁸ The virtues entail each other and one must have them all as a unity to have virtue at all. For Stoics there is no such thing as possessing some of the virtues and not others. Matthew's version of the story goes on to show that the young man does appropriate acts but not perfectly appropriate acts due to his lack of wisdom indicated by false values regarding the good.

¹⁸ Perhaps the best discussion of the topic is Schofield 1984.

But why did Matthew add the love command? For his Stoically shaped interpretation to work he must make clear reference to virtue or a virtue appropriate to the context. Matthew has made it clear in his larger narrative that for him love is the master virtue. In Stoic thought the virtues add the adverbial element that is central to their ethic. Virtues are the moral skills of the sage. Honoring parents, being a monogamous husband, and having wealth are for the Stoics in the category of indifferents. Such things that constitute the appropriate acts have value and are to be sought, but do not involve virtue (and the good) until the adverbial aspect is added. Acting as a child toward parents, a husband or using possessions involve virtue and perfectly appropriate acts when these things are done justly, courageously, wisely, lovingly and so on. The addition of the love command makes it clear that giving to the poor would entail the perfection of the young man's appropriate acts/keeping of the commandments if it were done lovingly. Then he would be a follower of Jesus

If this Stoically inflected reading of Matthew makes sense, then it helps to explain the gospel's so-called emphasis on intention or interiority that has puzzled and distinctively shaped Christian ethics throughout history. This tendency is clear and well known in the beatitudes. Broad scholarly agreement holds that Luke follows Q and that Matthew's dramatic changes and additions reflect its own preoccupations. So Luke makes it clear that the blessing to come in the kingdom of God is pronounced on actual poor, hungry and oppressed people (Lk 6:20-26). Matthew changes "blessed are you poor" to "blessed are the poor in spirit (*pneumati*)" meaning something like those who

know that they lack strength of pneumatic stuff.¹⁹ *Pneuma*, of course, plays a central role in Stoic thought.²⁰ Among other things it is the active material of one's mind, soul and character. Whether Matthew's *pneuma* has a Stoic shaping or not it is clear that the writer has shifted the blessing's meaning from referring to a class of people to a quality of character. Instead of blessing people who lack food, Matthew pronounces happiness in the kingdom on "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." I have already suggested that righteousness for Matthew is something like virtue for Stoics. The writer also adds blessings for mercifulness, purity of heart, and the peacemakers (5:7-9).²¹ Luke's Jesus announces a mission directed at the poor and the oppressed. Matthew's Jesus teaches about a rigorous quality of character that is the goal of his ethic and that will characterize the winners in the future kingdom.

Even more important for the moral thought of Christendom are teachings in negative formulation that have been taken on one extreme as indicating a radical asceticism and on the other as implying that the law is impossible to keep and that Jesus is cleverly abrogating it.²² To be angry at someone is as morally evil as murder (5:21-22) and to desire someone's wife sexually is as bad as, and equivalent to, the act of adultery (5:27-28). Thus Jimmy Carter confessed that he had committed adultery thousands of

¹⁹ Spirit here is typically given what I take to be an anachronistic modern understanding as a reference to one's subjective interiority or essential self.

²⁰ Engberg-Pedersen 2006.

²¹ Concepts for which there is arguably something similar in Stoicism.

²² Allison 1999, 1-5.

times. But perhaps the teachings are better understood through the lens of Stoicism.

Cato representing the Stoic position in Cicero's *On Ends* (3.32) says,

Whatever takes its start from wisdom must be immediately perfect in all of its parts. For in it is situated what we call "desirable." Just as it is wrong to betray one's country, to show violence to one's parents, to steal from temples, actions which consist in bringing about certain results, so even without any result it is wrong to fear, to show grief, or to be in a state of lust. As the latter are wrong not in their after-effects and consequences but immediately in their first steps, so those things which take their start from virtue are to be judged right from their first [moral psychological] undertaking and not by their accomplishment.²³

This ethic derives from a highly technical Stoic theory of action that resulted in making people morally responsible for their emotions and not just actions motivated by emotion (e. g., anger leading to murder). What matters ethically about any action, and Stoics treated emotions like actions, is the mental event that initiates the action. The mental event is a kind of assent that something is appropriate. For walking to be an action, and not just accidental stumbling forward, it must involve assent to the impression that walking is appropriate at this moment.²⁴ Unlike in much thought in the Cartesian tradition, the mental event need not be and was usually not thought to be conscious. Stoics emphasized that the things to which people assented involved values (i. e., beliefs) and that most of the time these reflected one's habits of thought and dispositions, that is,

²³ Translation is from LS, 363. I have changed "concupiscence" to "lust" and added the words in the brackets.

²⁴ I borrow the example from Graver 2007, 27.

character. Stoics analyzed anger as assent to the false belief that someone has caused you harm and the desire for revenge with an accompanying psychophysical upheaval. If one held to the correct value that only one's virtue/character/righteousness was a good and that it could not be harmed by others, then one could not assent as in the case above and have anger. A Stoic inspiration makes good sense of Matthew's Jesus teaching that the moral error in anger and sexual desire are matters of initiating mental events and not simply the final actions. In a similar way, 5:33-37 forbids oaths. Oath-taking was one of the most important mercantile/economic, political and religious practices in antiquity. The reason given for the prohibition is that what will happen in the future is beyond a person's control. One only has control over one's own character whether it is truthful and trustworthy or not.²⁵

It is important to understand Stoic thinking here in order to distinguish it from modern, often Kantian ethical theories that make morality depend upon the agent's intentions, and the appeal to good intentions sometimes in instances of ancient moral thinking. The point is not that the sage did not have the right intentions, but that the more restricted modern focus misses the larger point that the Stoics wanted to make. It is not that the sage needs to have thoughts about virtue or acting virtuously or altruistically or to will that the principle guiding her action apply to all humans. Both a sage and a wicked person can borrow money from a friend with exactly the same intention to pay it back, but the sage acts virtuously and the regular guy with moral error. The sage will, of course, characteristically have altruistic and generally virtuous thoughts and motivations, but the integration and consistency of her character organized around the good and not

²⁵ DesRosiers 2007.

correct thoughts as an ethical subject are what make the difference. For Matthew, I suspect that righteousness involves a character that is constituted by total commitment and obedience to God and his law in a way that is similar to the Stoic conception.

The other side of righteousness as a matter of character is the hard polemic against the hypocrisy of those who are outwardly doing the right things, but lack the right inner formation. Immediately after the exhortation to be perfect like God, comes a series of warnings against seeming to be altruistic and pious in order to win honor and good reputation when one is not truly altruistic and pious (6:1-17). God is able to see one's true inward character and will reward and punish (6:18).²⁶ The theme is prominent outside of the Sermon in Matthew and focuses on the scribes and Pharisees. Chapter 23 is an extremely harsh and extensive polemic against them. Matthew borrows a much less extensive hypocrisy theme from Mark and Q, but develops the theme that the scribes and Pharisees only seem to be righteous because they possess vices such as vanity, greed, and lack of self-mastery (23:5-6, 25) and do not have virtues such as justice, mercy and trustworthiness (23:23).

Returning to Mat 5:48, it is important to note that although scholars widely agree that the call to perfection is a general moral principle for Matthew, the immediate context is the call to love one's enemies. "Love your enemies and pray for those who are persecuting you, so that you may be sons of your father in the heavens. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and makes it rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do

²⁶ The first part of this is also Stoic. Epictetus, for example, says (2.14.11) that Stoics hold that God not only cares for the world, but "sees and not only what person does, but also what one intends and thinks."

the same do they not?” . . . be perfect as . . .” The command to imitate God in this respect is central to the thought of the sermon as a whole. God’s love is for all. It is perfect, complete. There has been persistent inconclusive debate about the role of Leviticus 19:8 in 5:43, but when one looks for both the idea of love or benevolence toward enemies and the kind of reasoning that supports the idea here, the evidence for this odd idea strongly points to Stoicism.

Epictetus (according to Arrian, *Diss.* 3.22.54) says that true philosophers if flogged “must love the one who flogs them.” And Seneca urges, “Someone gets angry with you? Challenge him with kindness in return” (*De Ira* 2.34) and “We shall never cease working for the common good, helping everyone and even our enemies, until our helping hand is feeble with age” (*De Otio* 1.4) For Stoics, the idea of following or imitating God (Seneca, *Vit. Beat.* 15; *Ep.*, 16:5; Epictetus, *Diss.*, 1:30; Marcus, 7:31) means caring for the creation, and above all fellow rational animals, in the way that divine Providence administers the common good.²⁷ Mt 5:45 almost sounds like an echo of Seneca, *De Ben.* 4:26: “If you are imitating the gods, you say, ‘then bestow benefits also upon the ungrateful, for the sun rises also upon the wicked, and the sea lies open to pirates . . .” Mt 7:25-34 (also 10:29-31) develops the theme of God’s providential care for the universe, teaching that God takes care of birds and flowers and humans alike in service of an exhortation to refrain from being anxious. What people are to do instead of worrying is to strive to have “God’s righteousness”(6:33). A Stoic would say that instead of treating the necessities of food and clothing as genuine goods and their lack as evils, those who are progressing toward virtue ought to realize that they share what is truly

²⁷ Reydam-Shils 2005, 73.

good with God, and that they ought to pursue that reason/wisdom/virtue. Foremost of the eupathic emotions (good emotions) of the sage was joy and sources give one of the sub-species of joy that would characterize the sage as *euthumia*, defined in one source as “joy at the administration of the universe.”²⁸

Again there is detailed technical Stoic theory behind their distinctive attitude toward enemies and love of humanity.²⁹ In their theory of human moral development (*oikeiosis*), the morally mature human will extend the kind of affection and concern that “good people” have for family and close kin to all humans when called upon to do so by fitting circumstances. Recent scholarship has shown how especially Stoics of the Roman period developed and extended these ideas.³⁰ But again I want to emphasize the point that Matthew does not have to detail or explicitly appeal to the technical theory in order to use Stoic thought in order to construe Jesus and create an ethic for him, especially since he is unlikely to want the connection to be specific and since the form is that of narrative.

I am convinced that the Stoic explanation works well in explaining the materials that I have treated thus far. There is a major problem that challenges my whole enterprise, however.³¹ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that any anger at all is

²⁸ Ps. Andronicus, *On Emotions* (SVF 3.432)

²⁹ On grounds for philanthropia in late Stoicism and especially theology, see Fiasse 2002.

³⁰ Reydam-Shils 2005, 53-82; Banateanu 2001.

³¹ This problem was first pointed out to me by Erin Roberts who is conducting research on anger in Matthew at Brown University and has written and read number of unpublished papers relating to the topic.

wrong, but later in the narrative Jesus seems to attack the money-changers in anger (Mt 21:12-13). One scholar has described the episode as Jesus' "temple tantrum."³² There is indeed a problem of Jesus seeming to blatantly contradict his own teachings. On a broader level this has long been recognized so that Hans Dieter Betz, for instance, in his monumental commentary has argued that the Sermon on the Mount was a pre-existing moral treatise that Matthew placed in his narrative without fully integrating it by making the whole consistent.³³ Betz' creative idea has not won assent.³⁴ To continue with examples of contradictions, in 5:22, Jesus teaches that someone who calls another person a fool will be liable to burn in Hell. But in 23:17 he calls the scribes and Pharisees fools using exactly the same word. If Matthew had adapted the Stoic position that emotions were moral errors, then we would expect this to apply not only to anger, but also to other emotions such as grief. But Jesus is said to have "grieved and been agitated" and says "I am extremely grief-stricken even to the point of death" (26:37-8). Would a Stoic sage acting like that?

Is Matthew's Jesus radically inconsistent or is there another explanation? Any answer must come to terms with that gospel's use of sources. It closely follows Mark's passion narrative that is tightly constructed around allusions to and quotations from "the" Greek translation of the Hebrew scripture. Mark's brilliant creation may have had too much authority by the time that Matthew wrote to allow for major changes or changes in key features of the story. So, for example, Mark's "I am extremely grief-stricken even to

³² E. g., see the Introduction of Fredriksen 2000.

³³ Betz 1995, 70-88.

³⁴ Stanton 1992, 307-325.

the point of death” followed by Matthew is a quotation from Psalm 42:6. Interpreters could always take the old tack of saying that Jesus had to act in that way in order to fulfill the scriptures.

But I want to suggest that there is a Stoic way to interpret Jesus’ behavior. This argument involves two general claims. First the sage’s action although always following the will of God, the universal law and reason, might *in particular circumstances* be contrary to what the accepted moral norms of non-sages indicated was right, even for sages. This would go along with the theme that Matthew borrows from Mark of Jesus’s ability to teach and act with unique authority. Thus Matthew’s narrative gives the sense that only Jesus was rightly able to teach what he taught and act in the often dramatic and unorthodox ways that he acted. Of course, this is because he is God’s son and the messiah and the son of man. But to put it in these terms is to be anachronistic and to fail to imagine the possibilities that readers contemporary with the author could have brought to its reading. As is well known and widely accepted in contemporary scholarship, son of god, for example, was a common expression for individuals thought to have a special relationship with the divine from Roman emperors to king David and on. The gospels are in the process of inventing the “Christian” idea that the Jews were looking for “the messiah.” In order to avoid anachronism, the historian has to ask what culturally available components Matthew drew upon to construct this strikingly new, yet conventional, figure. My claim is that the Stoic sage and aspects of Stoic ethics should be added to the mix.

Second, contrary to popular and scholarly conceptions of the Stoic, the sage was to be a highly “passionate” person who had and expressed strong feelings.³⁵ Scholars of early Christianity consistently treat Stoic *apatheia* as a total lack of emotion like that exhibited by Spock on Star Trek. But the Stoic teaching was that the sage would have a set of good emotions (*eupatheiai*) instead of the diseased emotional states of the non-sage. The sage was certainly wired in a different way, but he was not without feeling, even intense feeling. In Stoic theory, all impressions involve an act of assent that involves a judgment usually based upon one’s preexisting values and therefore entailing moral responsibility for the ensuing mental states. The Stoics taught that in the present cultures deeply corrupted by false values (e. g., wealth is a good, others can truly harm me, prestige and repute are goods) emotions as shaped by these values were moral diseases. The sage, however, would have “emotions” based solely on true values, virtue is the only good and vice the only evil. The evidence, I believe, following recent scholarship shows that these good emotions might involve intense feeling such as in joy, religious reverence and even erotic love.³⁶ A sage would never have grief, anger or fear.

Matthew seems to present Jesus as sinless, the only living righteous one in the story and the embodiment of God’s wisdom.³⁷ So Jesus can without hypocrisy call the Pharisees fools because he knows with certainty that they are fools and is himself consistently wise. It is just and righteous censure. The unrighteous, the imperfect, on the other hand, cannot justly censure others in this way. But grief and anger are more

³⁵ For what follows, see above all Graver 2007.

³⁶ See Graver 2007 with relevant bibliography.

³⁷ For some specific statements regarding Jesus’ righteousness, see 3:15 and 27:4, 19.

difficult. My hypothesis is that the author of Matthew may have conceived of Jesus in a consistent way encouraged by contemporary treatments of God's frequent displays of anger in the Hebrew scriptures. It is well known that Philo and other Jewish writers denied that God had this emotion and claimed that the texts were an accommodating way to express God's just indignation. The temple episode does not use the word anger. A sage does not have anger because she knows that no other person can truly cause unjust harm to the sage's good (virtue). Stoic theory might make it seem that the good emotions would only concern the sage's own good – what was up to him, and for the most part they do. But sources for the sub-species of the good emotions also have good emotions that express concern for the good of others. Ps. Andronicus, *On Emotions* (SVF 6.342), for instance, defines good intent (*eunoia*) as “a wish for good things for another for that person's sake.” One then might conceive of Jesus's action as an expression of his just indignation that the money-changers were causing harm to their good and the good of others by devaluing a place where only the model of God's perfection ought to be exhibited. Instead of fear, the sage was to have an emotion usually translated as caution. Andronicus defines one subspecies, reverence (*hagneia*), as “caution against misdeeds concerning the gods.” These considerations, I think, show that the hypothesis of a consistent Jesus shaped by the Stoic idea of the sage deserves further study.

Matthew could not do much with an inherited episode of Jesus fulfilling scripture by grieving deeply. Origen who along with many ancient Christian writers assumed like the Stoics that grieving was morally wrong had an interpretation that may deserve

consideration.³⁸ Origen claims that Matthew writes “Jesus began to grieve” and uses the Stoic concept of a pre-emotion to explain that text.³⁹ Jesus did not have an emotion - that requires assent - but only the initial reaction that the Stoics said were involuntary and natural. Matthew gets “began” from Mark but changes Mark’s word “ekthambeisthai” that usually (at least without the prefix) means to be amazed in Mark and elsewhere. But translators assimilate it to Matthew and the Psalm and usually render it as to be distressed. Matthew changes this to the common word for grief that the Stoics used, a word that connects verse 37 to the word for grief in the quotation from Psalm 42. Matthew then can be read in this Stoic way: Jesus had the initial “biting contraction” of grief that is natural to all humans, including sages, accompanied with his proclamation of the scripture that predicted it, but never allowed the natural pre-emotion to develop into an evil and unnatural emotion that construed his impending death as an evil. In Stoic thought, death is a preferred indifferent. Life ought to be desired, pursued and preserved, but one is not to think that who one truly is and what is truly valuable will be harmed by that natural and universal state that is another part of God’s plan. The prayers of Jesus that follow can be read as expressing this attitude. At the end of the scene (26:42) that starts with the “pre-grief,” he calmly says to God, if my death cannot be avoided, then your will be done.

If this reading is correct, then Philo employs the same strategy in treating Abraham’s grieving over Sarah (*QG* 1.79). Even though Gen 23:2 says that “Abraham

³⁸ My discussion of Origen, Philo and pre-emotions is based on Graver, 2007, 102-06 and 1999.

³⁹ Graver 1999.

came to mourn for Sarah and to weep,” Philo strongly denies that Abraham had the emotion of grief. Margaret Graver shows that Philo’s argument uses the Stoic concepts of impression, assent and pre-emotion.⁴⁰ Abraham had the initial natural pangs of loss, but did not allow this to develop into the emotion that expresses the judgment that God taking Sarah was a genuine evil. Of surviving Stoic writers, Seneca seems to go the furthest when he grants that the sage will involuntarily weep and shake with sobs at a funeral.⁴¹ The sage will also voluntarily (i. e., in a manner that is constructed with reason) and therefore eupathically weep in a way that involves joy when remembering the goodness and companionship of the loved one. That a major Stoic figure can go this far shows that Matthew’s author and ancient readers could quite easily construe Jesus’s grieving in a way that would be consistent with the Stoically inflected teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴²

⁴⁰ Following Graver, 2007, 103.

⁴¹ *Ep.* 99.

⁴² An unstoic element in the context is the saying in 26:41 that “the spirit (*pneuma*) is willing but the flesh is weak.” Stoic doctrine rejected an opposition between mind or soul and body such as found in Platonic traditions. However, Stoics in the Roman period in spite of enunciating the Stoic theory, often used Platonic sounding dualistic language. This is especially true of Epictetus and Seneca. This seems at least partly due to the fact that Stoic lineage-making had by this time long traced Stoic origins to Socrates and Epictetus and Seneca took Plato’s dialogues to be genuine sources for the founder of Stoicism.

The reasons why the author of Matthew drew upon Stoic ethics seem clear. That writer inherited a Jesus who was known as a teacher, but had no clear and elaborated ethical teachings that would make him like, or rather superior to, the other great teachers of the culture. Stoicism was the most prominent and widely respected philosophy of the day. Furthermore, it had a reputation for being both rigorous and popular. It was popular in the sense that it was directed at everyone and focused upon those who were sinners and those who were trying to make moral progress. But it also held up the nearly impossible ideal of the sage and urged people to measure themselves against this model of human perfection. The rigor fit well with Matthew's harsh apocalyptic ideas about an exacting and vengeful god who would consign all but a faithful few to eternal torment. That gospel's adaptation of the ethic also helped to solve a huge problem that it had inherited from Mark and Q. How is it that people of God, the Jews, had been so blind and so evil that God had to destroy the nation and the religion as it had been known? How is it that they could have rejected and killed God's chosen messiah and been allowed to bear such evil guilt that even their descendents would share it. With resources adapted from Stoicism, Matthew could "argue" that they were evil because in spite of all outward appearance of being good people, they lacked the essential qualitative aspect of character that God had always required and taught through his law, righteousness. The problem that Matthew left for future generations of Christian thinkers was that the rigorous ethical side wedded to an apocalyptic framework with a vengeful god possessed an ill fit with the love of enemies and the universal providential care of God that the writer also borrowed from Stoicism. This dilemma is, I think, one reason why later Christian thinkers from Origen to Augustine had to add another story about an originary or pre-

mundane fall that would provide an explanation in terms of a deep general human recalcitrance that was then read as the backdrop for the stories of scripture.

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