

‘I WILL GIVE YOU REST’: THE BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REST MOTIF IN THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

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This study examines Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3:7-4:11 as the New Testament passages in which the rest motif is expressed thematically. It investigates both passages as products of first-century Judaism and Christianity in the light of the realisation that the Old Testament is the most important factor for establishing the concerns and thinking of the New Testament writers. For both, God’s promises of rest to Israel, as those promises were expressed in the Old Testament, were coming to fulfilment in Christ.

The prevailing interpretation of Matthew 11:28-30 argues that Matthew joined this logion to one of the several Q passages that he was editing in order to further a ‘Wisdom Christology’ (11:19 [Q 7:35]; 11:25-27 [Q 10:21-22]; 23:34-36 [Q 11:49-51]; 23:27-39 [Q 13:34-35]). The salient points of this argument are as follows. In drawing on Q, Matthew was drawing on a sayings collection that some scholars compare with the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas; it belongs to a particular genre, ‘sayings of the wise’. It is often argued that one important aspect of Q’s Christology developed under the influence of the myth of personified Wisdom, especially the notion that Wisdom sent out her messengers into the world. Some of Q’s sayings might suggest that the Christians who used this collection understood Jesus to have been one of Wisdom’s messengers, possibly her final and greatest prophet. For Matthew, the argument continues,

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this line of thought erred by not going far enough. He set out to correct Q by modifying the above mentioned sayings in such a way that Jesus was identified with Wisdom. We should thus view Matthew as an active participant in a type of Christological speculation drawing on wisdom thought and co-ordinated to a 'trajectory' extending from Wisdom to John's Logos and ultimately the Gnostic Redeemer. The logion of 11:28-30 does not itself derive from Q, but the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas contains a version of 11:28-30 that might derive from a pre-Matthean source. This hints at the possibility that the saying originated in the circles just described, but the strongest evidence in favour of this possibility is the logion's alleged function as an allusion to sayings about Wisdom in Sirach; it is in this connection that Matthew is to have employed the logion, thus completing the Wisdom Christology of 11:25-27. In 11:28-30, Jesus therefore speaks *in persona sapientiae*.

Through exegesis of these same Matthean passages, this thesis argues alternatively that though Matthew knew and endorsed traditions that had already identified Jesus and Wisdom, he was not furthering such a Christology, and 11:28-30 was not employed in this connection. Matthew 11:27, to which Matthew joined verses 28-30, compares favourably with sayings about wisdom, but Matthew's point is more likely that the Son, who is like Wisdom, is greater than Moses. 11:28-30 is found to be ineffective as an allusion to Sirach, and Matthew's modification of the logion is, on the one hand, difficult to explain in terms of either Sirach or a Wisdom Christology, and, on the other hand, readily understood as a development of his theme of the meek king, the Son of David (Matthew is responsible for at least ὅτι πραῦς εἰμι καὶ ταπεινὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ). This association with the Son of David theme corresponds to the Old Testament pattern wherein God's promise of rest is associated pre-eminently with the Davidic house. Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 11:1-10 and 1 Chronicles 22:6ff. portray a son of David and son of God, one anointed with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, an ἀνὴ ἀναπαύσεως, the builder of the temple (Mt. 12:6), whose reign brings rest for Israel. It is evident that this is how Matthew understood

11:28-30, and the logion's connection with 12:1-14 evidences his further interest in the idea of an eschatological Sabbath.

The union of the Old Testament themes of 'rest in the land' and the Sabbath forms a parallel with Hebrews 3-4, which is a midrash on Ψ 94:11 (Ps. 91:11) and Genesis 2:2. Hebrew's development of the κατάπαυσις-idea has been a bone of contention for competing views of the religious historical background of Hebrews generally, with some arguing that the conception of 3:7-4:11 is closer to apocalyptic parallels such as 4 Ezra 7, and others that it is more likely owing to traditions such as those that were expressed by Philo and, later on, in Gnosticism. In fact, we are helped only marginally by either the Philonic or the apocalyptic parallels, though, in general, Hebrews 3-4 is closer to the latter group. This thesis argues that the New Testament writer's pastoral concerns are represented by the Old Testament passages themselves as he exegetes them within the framework of his Christological interpretation of history. The idea is one of a future entrance of the whole community of saints into God's resting place, which is prepared in heaven, which is where God has celebrated his own Sabbath since the foundation of the world, and which has been the goal of the one promise given from the beginning and brought to fulfilment by the Son; there, at the time of Christ's Parousia, the people of God will participate in a Sabbath celebration around God's throne as they rest from their lives of faithful endurance through persecution in this world. Those who do not so persevere will not make the entrance, a fact illustrated for the present generation by the judgement already pronounced over the wilderness generation.

Parallels with Acts 7 suggest that Hebrews' development of the rest motif stems in part from Hellenistic Christian traditions, and it can be demonstrated that the thought of the midrash is driven by the Christology of the epistle. Consideration of the use of the rest motif in the Old Testament along with consideration of the concerns of Hebrews enables us to understand the selection, the joining, and the use of Y 94 [95] and Genesis 2. Moreover, this midrash is developed against the dramatic backdrop of Numbers 14 where the Israelites are denied entrance into Canaan because of disobedience. This parallel

situation sets in relief the potential consequences for the whole community when only a few rebel, as well as the impossibility of changing God's judgement after the fact, points that are of general importance to Hebrews. Recognition of this Old Testament background also brings to light the advancement from Numbers 12 in Hebrews 3:1-6, to Numbers 14 in 3:7ff.

Matthew and Hebrews also associate the promise of rest with similar Christological thinking: the Son, whose profile resembles that of Wisdom (for Mt. 11:27 see above; see Heb. 1:1-3), and whose relationship to God recalls Nathan's oracle regarding David's son (cf. Mt. 11:27 with 2 Sa. 7:11,14; 1 Ch. 22:9ff.; Heb. 1:5 quotes 1 Par. 17:13 and Ψ 2:7), surpasses Moses. In both Matthew 11 and Hebrews 3, this comparison to Moses draws on a group of related Old Testament passages (Nu. 12; Ezk. 33; Dt. 34), and in both New Testament passages it introduces the fulfilment of God's promises of rest, which were associated with Moses and David. Taken together with the promise of rest, elements of this pattern of ideas feature in parallels from the Old Testament, New Testament, and other early Jewish and Christian literature. Yet consideration of the differences between Matthew 11 and Hebrews 3-4 leads to the conclusion that these two passages are best viewed as independent developments of the same Old Testament themes within broad Christian traditions.

In view of the importance of the background of the rest motif for previous treatments of these passages and for this one, nearly half of this study is devoted to an investigation of the Old Testament and other Jewish and Christian literature. Along the way, other usages of the rest motif in the New Testament are also discussed (Acts 3:20; 7:49.; 2 Thes. 1:7; Rev. 14:13; also Jn. 5:17).