

**Title: MATTHEW 5.3-12: A READING OF AN EMBATTLED AND  
CONTESTIVE- ACCOMMODATION IDENTITY POLITICS FROM  
MATTHEW'S BEATITUDES.**

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the late twentieth century, ethics, eschatology, and identity formation, have been collectively proposed as significant in explaining the Beatitudes as a basis for grounding the identity of the Matthean community. However, this kind of interpretation neglects the important role of the Beatitudes in elaborating the ideological nature of righteousness applied by Matthew to negotiate the identity of the Matthean community. This interpretation is important because righteousness is crucial in understanding the Christian identity of the Matthean community in the context of identity politics. Thus, the question I intend to address is as follows: How does the author of the Gospel of Matthew employ the Beatitudes to address his community? In this chapter I will argue that Matthew employs the Beatitudes rhetorically to construct and legitimate embattled and contestive-accommodation mode of identity politics for the Matthean community. He undertakes this task in the context of the socio-economic and political aspects of the Roman Empire, post-70 Diaspora Judaism, and the Jesus Movement.*

**Keywords:** Ideology; Identity Politics; Assimilation; Beatitudes; Matthew 5.3-12; Roman Empire; Diaspora Judaism; the Jesus Movement

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following Eduard Schweizer, Robert A. Guelich (1976) applies form, literary and source criticism to the study of the Matthean Beatitudes. Guelich contends that they are primarily a form of Jewish wisdom literature that can be classified as declarative rhetoric with a “hortative and parenetic tone” (Guelich 1976, 415-416, 418). Writing ten years after Guelich, Allison underscores the hortative and parenetic tone of the Beatitudes by claiming that instead of making demands, they offer comfort to shape, encourage, and console the Christian reader (Allison 1987, 430). Similarly, Talbert disputes the notion of the Beatitudes as entrance to the Kingdom of God requirements, confirming that they are “promises of eschatological blessings” (Talbert 2004, 47). In his commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount* (1995), Hans Dieter Betz regards the Beatitudes as connected to ethics and morality” (Betz 1995, 97). Neyrey (1998, 164-165), as if answering the questions raised by Betz concerning neighboring communities to the Matthean community, analyzes the Matthean Beatitudes in the context of the first-century Mediterranean cultural values of honor and shame, attempting to answer the question, “how would the Sermon on the Mount be heard in a world whose pivotal values are honor and shame?” Neyrey states that in the Beatitudes:

Jesus then ...changed the way the honor game was played and redefined the source of honor, namely, acknowledgement by God, not by neighbors. As a result, by conforming to the image of the Master, disciples are shamed in the eyes of their peers and become least and last before their neighbors. But ... Jesus honors them himself with a grant of reputation and respect that far surpasses what could be hoped for in the public arena of the village (Neyrey 1998, 164-165).

Neyrey suggests that the Matthean beatitudes outline Jesus's own criteria for according honor to his followers. This contravened the social values of honor in the larger Mediterranean world which was largely dominated by the Roman Empire. By translating μακάριος to "honoring", Neyrey views Jesus' declarative rhetoric in the beatitudes, characterized by μακάριος, as stating "how honorable are those who suffer a loss of honor." (Neyrey 1998, 167). Neyrey aptly observes that in his Beatitudes, Matthew attempts to apply Jesus' declaration of honor in a manner that inverts the social values of the Roman Mediterranean world. In other words, Neyrey advances Guelich's notion of the Beatitudes' portrayal of the Matthean Jesus as providing the Matthean community with norms of honor that contrast with the popular social values of honor and shame in their society. Moreover, Neyrey complements Guelich's deficiency of not telling us how the norms outlined in the beatitudes functioned in Matthew's community with his position that the beatitudes aimed at granting honor to the Matthean community. Despite this insight, Neyrey fails to mention the types of political strategies the Roman Empire employed, being the superpower of the time that prompted the composition of the beatitudes as a response.

Warren Carter (2000, 167) grounds his study of the beatitudes on K.C. Hanson and K. Wengst's work in order to describe the beatitudes as "affirming conditions and behaviors which God regards as honorable or esteemed." Carter, like Neyrey, sees the function of honor in the Matthean Beatitudes, but goes beyond Neyrey to see the Beatitudes as describing the identity of the Matthean community on two fronts. First, Carter suggests that the Beatitudes stand like religious rituals for the Matthean community, because he insists that the conditions and behaviors outlined in them "are to be practiced by the audience," namely; the Matthean community. Viewing the Beatitudes in the context of Isaiah 61, Carter contends that the Beatitudes "describe not personal qualities but oppressive situations of distress, which are honored ... because God's reign reverses them." These oppressive and distressful situations, according to Carter, are experienced by the audience of the Beatitudes as, "terrible consequences of Roman Power" (Carter 2000, 131). Carter further suggests that the Matthean Beatitudes are a response to the Roman Empire's socio-economic and political strategies of assimilation in the empire. Second, Carter suggests that the Beatitudes impact on the Matthean community because they "mark the features of a faithful and favored blessed group." Consequently, Carter's notion of the Beatitudes as constituting, affirming, and challenging "a community's distinctive identity and practice" (Carter 2000, 130) illustrates the functional role of the Beatitudes as a source of norms for shaping the cultural identity of the Matthean community. Furthermore, Carter describes the Roman regime, as further nuanced by Neyrey, as oppressive. Carter's study argues that the Matthean Beatitudes are indicative of the oppressive and distressful conditions under Roman rule, which is also the cause of the discourse in the Beatitudes. Carter (2000, 131) does not specifically describe the Roman political strategies that caused these oppressive conditions. However, by engaging with social identity political theory as a method for analyzing the Beatitudes, it is possible to describe the specific oppressive and distressful conditions highlighted by Carter. It also provides an explanation for the type of identity politics evident in the discourse of the Beatitudes. To this end, the discussion now turns to a brief description of the social identity political theory before exploring function of the Beatitudes in shaping the identity of the Matthean community.

## 2. SOCIAL IDENTITY POLITICAL THEORY (SIPT)

To address the question of identity construction, principle of Social Identity Political Theory (SIPT) is useful. SIPT is premised on two presupposition: The first presupposition is that a groups' identity construction takes shape through *recategorization*, formation of a *superordinate identity* and a process *depersonalization* in order to transcend negative aspects of identity such as racism, ethnocentrism, and geographical limitations. The second presupposition of SIPT is that ideology is applied to legitimate a group's identity by identifying a minor group with a superior one to create a superordinate identity to esteem the image of the minor group.

SIPT is derived from social identity theories espoused by Faulkner, Kuecker and Esler, whose views are informed by Henri Tajfel and his students, John Turner, the primary proponents of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), respectively. Briefly presented, two-step elaboration of this social identity theory is important. First, *recategorization* refers to the "division of the social world into assessable group entities," whose main three preconditions are *depersonalization*, *stereotyping*, and *vilification* (Faulkner 2005, 3-4; Kuecker 2016, 70; Esler 2016, 164-165). This is pertinent for elaborating on the dynamics of group relations in identity formation. In pursuit of this, *depersonalization*, *stereotyping*, and *vilification* are vital preconditions to *recategorization* because they collectively facilitate peoples' self-conceptions of who they are in terms of community membership, and in the less favorable attitudes towards the outer group (Faulkner 2005, 2-4; Kuecker 2016, 70). *Stereotype* refers to a conception of peoples' self-awareness of who they are in terms of their group membership, rather than unique individual traits. Stereotypical categories may bear either negative or positive connotations (Esler 2003, 21-22; Kuecker 2016, 70). *Vilification*, like stereotypes, conceives identity in terms of group membership, but mostly appeals to derogatory language or prejudice against members of an outer group (Faulkner 2005, 3-4).

Furthermore, this principle of SIPT that groups' identity construction takes shape through *recategorization*, formation of a *superordinate identity* and a process *depersonalization* in order to transcend negative aspects of identity such as racism, ethnocentrism, and geographical limitations, advances SIT and SCT by entwining social identity theory with Moon's aspect of embattled mode of identity politics to constitute the lens for reading Matthew's Beatitudes. In his article, "Who Am I and Who Are You? Conflicting Narratives of Collective Selfhood in Stigmatized Groups" (2012), Moon defines the embattled mode of identity politics as a response by a group that, upon realizing that their dominant narrative is threatened with self-destruction, "respond[s] by defining and defending explicit, fixed boundaries, foreclosure negotiation and eventually reify boundaries" (Moon 2012, 1350). Moon produces four concepts that help to advance Esler's (2016, 166) view of the Beatitudes as presenting group norms to demonstrate the embattled mode of identity politics of the Matthean community. These four concepts are: definition, defense, boundaries and negotiations.

### 3. EMBATTLED COMMUNITY

The embattled mode of identity politics of the Matthean community is first and foremost indicated by the capacity of the Beatitudes to define and defend a superordinate identity of the Matthean community.

#### 3.1 *Ethics for Defining Identity*

Grounding his view on the work of H. Windisch and George Kennedy, Ernst Baasland suggests that the Beatitudes belong to the epideictic rhetoric that has interwoven both ethical and eschatological “entrance requirements” (Baasland 2015, 46). Contrary to Esler, the Matthean Beatitudes are to be understood as epideictic rhetoric that combines both ethical and eschatological perspectives to honor the Matthean community in terms of their relations to the Kingdom of God. This position is guided by the notion that the beatitudes poses an ethical perspective that rhetorically functions to define the identity of the Matthean community. This is based on the conviction that the Matthean Beatitudes outline certain attitudes (Matt 5.3-6) and behaviors (5.7-12) as principles that convey cognitive components (Baasland 2015, 159) pertinent in constructing the identity of the Matthean community. These principles communicate knowledge concerning the identity of the Matthean Community. In their capacity as cognitive components, the Beatitudes have a heuristic role that provides an understanding of the identity of the Matthean community in terms of their existential experiences in relation to out-groups.

The moral perspectives of the ethical principles expressed in the Beatitudes is outlined in Matt 5.21-48. Thus, in Matthew’s Beatitudes, the “poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” and “the meek” (5.3-5) collectively represent the community’s “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” (5.6) and provide the ethical criteria for constructing the identity of the Matthean community. They also point to the fact that the Beatitudes were intended to guide the community’s response in addressing their existential challenges, as briefly highlighted in Matt 5.21-48. Jeffrey T. Nealon (1998, 37) noted from Gardiner’s comments about Bakhtin and Levinas’ work that “each of them argues that ethics is constitutively linked to corporeality, the direct experience of lived time and place, and our affective and meaningful relations with concrete others.” Thus, Gardiner’s view of ethics enforces the notion that the Beatitudes are indeed a set of ethical principles, because they are reflective of the experiences of the Matthean community as members of God’s Kingdom in relation to other groups.

Because the Beatitudes present a set of ethical principles for the Matthean community, in effect they portray a definition of the community in terms of the non-violent attitudes they ought to have embraced. By implication, the Beatitudes in Matt 5.3-6 are a kind of guideline for character formation in what Pierre Janet (1928, 321) refers to as “une activite plus ou moins grande de la pensee interieure”; an emotional activity conditioned by inner thoughts subjected to obedience to Jesus’ declarations and commands. The attitudes described effectively define the identity of the Matthean community, because they underline the ethical principles by which they ought to derive self-knowledge of who they are and how they want to be known by others

In addition to defining the identity of the Matthean community by outlining the ethical aspects, the beatitudes envision a superordinate identity for the Matthean community.

### 3.2 Super ordinate Identity

The ethical aspects of the Beatitudes in Matt 5.3-6, in effect, through a process of depersonalization, have categorized the Matthean community with a new identity, known not by belonging to particular ethnic group or race, but by the attitudes outlined therein. In this case, a depersonalizing effect is experienced in the sense that it is not biological attributes or cultural norms, but the attitudes outlined in 5.3-6 that constitute group membership. In other words; depersonalization here means the adherents of the Matthean community have subordinated their individual ethnic identities in favor of the new identity reconstructed by the Beatitudes in 5.3-6. The attitudes outlined in 5.3-6 have thus become identity-markers for the Matthean community. Consequently, the Beatitudes have the capacity to enforce unity and integration through a process of recategorization imparted through depersonalization of the group members. As a result, by embracing the attitudes of “being poor in the spirit”, “mourning”, and “being meek” (5.3-5), not only will the group members employ these attitudes as norms for their superordinate category of identity that transcends racial, ethnic and geographical limitations, but they also have to necessarily suppress negative aspects of racist, ethnocentric or geographically-conditioned prejudices of identity markers in order to become and remain members of the superordinate category, which in this article will be referred to as “the Matthean category.”

Viewing “the Matthean category” as a superordinate identity was important because attempting to create unity and integration was key to consolidating the community that had been dispersed by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple following the first Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-73 CE. Creating a superordinate identity in the late first-century CE also provided an appropriate method of consolidating people from different ethnic groups affected by the widespread of persecution in the Roman Empire (Matt 10.17-23). Understanding “being poor in spirit,” “mourning” and “being meek” in Matt 5.3-5 as expressive of “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” (5.6), and “being merciful,” “being pure in heart,” and “being peacemakers” in 5.7-9 as depicting the response to being “persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (5.10) it becomes clear that the Beatitudes are presenting a set of group norms for the Matthean community as claimed by Esler.<sup>1</sup> These norms defend and secure the identity of the Matthean community through a motif of contrast in terms of their relations with other groups. So, how would the Beatitudes have functioned to facilitate a defensive criterion as a means of identity construction in the Matthean community?

### 3.3 Defensive Criterion

Wanamaker contends that in pursuit of constructing a social identity, “one socially constructed and maintained world is rejected in favor of another” (Wanamaker 1987, 20). From Wanamaker’s position, it is evident that the process of acquiring an identity involves a defensive approach in the context of an insider vis-a-vis the outsider group. An embattled mode of identity politics as a response to threats against a community’s dominant narrative of

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<sup>1</sup> As norms of a community they effectively participate in the formation of the identity of the community in two related ways. As Esler (2016, 166) claims, norms impact the identity of the community by instructing “members how they should think and feel and how they should behave if they are to belong to the group and share its distinctive identity.”

identity prompts the question: What kind of threats and oppressors did Matthew have in mind as he composed his Beatitudes as the basis for an embattled mode of identity politics? It is by attempting to answer this question that this article develops Esler's findings on the Matthean Beatitudes. Without relating the Beatitudes to the Roman Empire, Esler (2016, 166) claims that Matthean Beatitudes presents group norms rhetorically presented as "the central tendencies of the category ... that defines one group and distinguishes it from other groups." Given that Matthew was writing his Gospel for a community in the city of Antioch, a city in the Roman province of Syria in the late first-century CE, it is most likely that Matthew had in mind the humiliating treatment of the Judaeans of the Jesus Movement, who probably constituted a majority of his audience, and the treatment that the Jerusalem temple and priesthood had received from the Flavian dynasty during the Jewish revolt against Rome in 69-73 CE.<sup>2</sup>

As witnessed by Josephus, it must have been a humiliating experience for the Judaeans in Antioch to have been paraded in the streets as prisoners of war by Titus alongside the booty (Josephus, *AJ* 12. 119-124; Josephus, *BJ* 7. 103, 106-111, 118, 123-157). The parading of the 700 Judaeans in Rome and was probably used as a political strategy by the Flavian dynasty not only to demonstrate the total defeat of a political foe, but also to demonstrate the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. Baasland correctly suggests that the Beatitudes from the Gospel of Thomas<sup>3</sup> echo the three-fold mention of persecution in Matt 5.10-12. The Beatitudes, which connect persecution to being blessed for knowing the Father, "seem to reflect real persecution" in the Roman Empire (Baasland 2015, 62). Thus, *mastigoo* in Matthew 10.17, translated to "scourge" or "beat with a lash" is likely applied metaphorically in the narrative to remind the people of the recurring nature of the dishonorable treatment of the Jewish people by the Sanhedrin in order to help the Matthean community understand the religious and political reasons for their current suffering and dishonorable treatment under the Flavian dynasty.

This persecution, however, does not mean that the Flavian dynasty always wished to relentlessly dominate the Jewish people. According to Josephus (*BJ* 7.103-109), although Titus had paraded the Jewish prisoners in Antioch, he had resisted the peoples' demands to expel the Jewish residents or withdraw their Rome-granted religious rights. He told them that Jewish people did not have a country, because it had been destroyed during the 66-73 Jewish revolt. Neither do the Beatitudes depict persecution against the followers of Jesus as officially sanctioned by Rome. The kind of persecution committed by the Flavians may have been taking place in Israel before the revolt. As Luz suggests, it replicates itself in Nero's time

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<sup>2</sup> As norms of a community they effectively participate in the formation of the identity of the community in two related ways. As Esler (2016, 166) claims, norms impact the identity of the community by instructing "members how they should think and feel and how they should behave if they are to belong to the group and share its distinctive identity."

<sup>3</sup> See John Dominic Crossan's (1986, 25) publication the *Sayings Parallels: A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition*. According to Crossan, the Gospel of Thomas, which was written after the Gospel of Matthew and probably used Matthew as one of its major sources, seems to be a witness for Christian persecution in the late first-century CE. This is based on the beatitude in the Gospel of Thomas that states, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted within themselves. It is they who have truly come to know the Father" (GTh. 69.1).

(Luz 2007, 199), and therefore it could have still been happening against followers of Jesus in other areas of the Roman Empire in late first-century CE.

Whether the persecution was happening to the Jesus Movement at large, or specifically to the Matthean community in Antioch, the most interesting thing is that Matthew's Beatitudes have a political function in the Gospel narrative. Matthew intended to negotiate the identity of the Matthean community by contesting the use of political power by individual Roman emperors, such as Titus and Vespasian and the Judaeen elites, to subjugate the Jewish community, which included members of the Jesus Movement in Antioch. Robbins' inter-textual texture becomes useful in helping to understand how classical authors in the first century provided social, cultural and historical insights to elaborate the discourse of early Christian communities. Josephus (*BJ* 7.47-59) describes Antiochus, a Roman acculturated Jewish leader in Antioch who accused the Jews of planning to burn the city of Antioch. He compelled the Judaeen in Antioch to join him in sacrificing to the city gods. He also abolished Sabbath observance, incited violence against Jews, and threatened to kill those who dissented.

The Beatitudes grants public acknowledgement of worth and honor in respect to public expectations (Esler 2016, 166). Viewed in the context of the Flavian dynasty, the Beatitudes outline group norms that, while honoring the community of Matthew, also ideologically function as a source of non-violent political power that Matthew employs to subvert the political values, such as use of violent force against one's enemies, enforced by the Roman Empire. In composing the Beatitudes, the implied author of Matthew's Gospel intended to use Roman imperial collaborators, the elites, the Judaeen aristocracy, and the military rhetorically to create the impression of Roman political imperial structure as being responsible for the oppression directed at his local community.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Beatitudes represent an embattled mode of identity politics of the Matthean community, because the SM was written to address not only a monolithic political context, but also economic, social and political issues being experienced by the Matthean community, there is a social aspect of it that Matthew included as he negotiated the identity of his community in terms of borrowing from earlier Jewish traditions. The inter-textual relations between Psalm 37 and the third Beatitude declaring, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5 NIV), are crucial in elaborating how Matthew employs the Beatitudes to legitimate the social status of his community in late first-century Antioch.

So far, the superordinate identity of "the Matthean category" has been described. Yet to be defined is the nature of this category in terms of whether it is Judaeen, Christian, Gentile Christian, or some combination of Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian. Exploring

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<sup>4</sup>The presence of soldiers, governor's absolute power, and the image of Caesar on the denarius in Matt 22.15-22 probably present the picture of the oppressor that the beatitudes addressed. To this end, the *stratiutehs* (Roman soldiers) in Matthew's narrative are organized into *streira* (cohorts) and legions (26.27, 53). Weaver's observation that cohorts and legions were composed of 600 and 6000 men, respectively (Weaver 2005, 109), indicates a heavy military presence in the neighborhood of the Matthean community. These Roman soldiers operated under the command of the governor; 27.27-38 carrying out official punishments such as arrest and binding (14.3), flogging (20.19; 27.26), beheading (14.10), and crucifixion (27.27-38, 5154).



how the identity of the Matthean category is legitimated provides a good position to describe the identity category to which the Matthean community belongs. So, how do the Beatitudes legitimate the identity of the Matthean community?

#### **4. LEGITIMATING IDENTITY OF THE MATTHEAN COMMUNITY**

The rhetorical function of the Matthean Beatitudes is underscored by its ideological, contestive and accommodative concerns.

##### **4.1 Ideological concerns**

To address the issue of legitimation, this section and the next will engage the second assumption of SIPT, namely; that ideology is applied to legitimate a group's identity by identifying a minor group with a superior one to create a superordinate identity to esteem the image of the minor group. Legitimation is an ideological process mostly achieved through universalization, rationalization, or identification with superior authority (Wanamaker 2003b, 200-201; Kuecker 2016, 70) to secure the self-esteem of an oppressed or marginalized group. In the case of the legitimation of the identity of the Matthean community, Jesus, Israel, and John the Baptist play crucial roles.

Although Keener (2009, 171), separates Matt 5.3-9 and 5.10-12, saying that they present Jesus' address to Jews and to his disciples, these two sections function complementarily in the formation of the identity of the Matthean community. To separate 5.3-9 from 5.10-12 because of Jesus' address to the Judaeans and his disciples is to ignore Matthew's use of Jesus' sayings in his narrative. While the Beatitudes in 5.3-6 have been noted to present the attitudes that describe the norms for constructing the identity of the Matthean community, those in 5.7-12 ideologically present archetypes that empower the community to relate to the external world, namely; the Roman Empire and post-70 Diaspora Judaism. For the sake of brevity, a discussion of the spectrum of the relations of the Matthean community will be limited to post-70 Judaism, just as the above analysis was limited to the Roman Empire. How did Matthew, in 5.11-12, facilitate the legitimation of the Matthean community's identity in relation to the Roman Empire?

##### **4.2 Borrowing from and Accommodation of Jewish traditions**

Besides reflecting the embattled nature of identity politics, the Matthean beatitudes envisions the accommodative and contestive aspect of identity for the Matthean community. Consequently, contestive-accommodation identity politics envisioned by the implied author of the Beatitudes rhetorically borrows and accommodates traditions from Judeans and the Jesus Movement, not only to legitimate but also to negotiate the identity of the Matthean community

To explain Matthew's application of the Beatitudes in 5.11-12 to legitimate the identity of his community, these Beatitudes need to be viewed in the context of Matthew's borrowing from three important aspects of Israel's covenantal traditions, ultimately accomplishing his ideological purposes. First, Matthew introduces his Gospel narrative in a brief genealogy of "Jesus Christ, the Son of David, Son of Abraham" (1.1). By introducing Jesus in the literary context of David and Abraham, Matthew grounds the identity of Jesus in

two key figures in Israel's covenantal history; Abraham and David. In order to present Jesus, as Carter (2000, 3) suggests, as an "agent of God's saving purpose." Matthew borrows from Jewish tradition to accomplish two important tasks. First, to locate Jesus within God's covenant with Israel (Genesis 17; 2 Samuel 7). By locating Jesus' identity in Israel's covenant, not only does the narrator, borrowing from Hebrew traditions, delegitimize the salvific claims of the cult of the emperor based on the conception of benefaction and the emperor's divine status associated with the cult mediated to the populace through the elites, as evidenced by Tacitus (*Annals* 4.6; *Agricola* 21), but he also legitimates the identity of the Matthean community by identification with the person of Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the People of Israel.

Second, the shaping of the cultural identity of the Matthean community through political and social functions and the Beatitude concerning the "poor in the spirit" (Matt 5.3) informs the sub-cultural status of the Matthean community. An inter-textual comparison of the Matthean (Matt 5.3-12) and Lukan (Luke 6.20-26) Beatitudes shows that while the Beatitude about the "the meek", who are promised the earth is found in Matt 5.5, it is totally lacking in the Lukan version of the Beatitudes. In both texts, Beatitudes concerning the "poor" occur. In contradiction to Matthew, Luke seems to emphasize material poverty (Luke 6.20), while Matthew stresses the spiritual aspect (Matt 5.3). Davies and Allison (1988, 442) noted that "in spirit" is a Matthean redaction where *ptookhos* (the poor), in the nominative masculine plural, as part of religious macarisms, overturns "a popular secular sentiment... Blessed are the rich," refers to the needy, those dependent on others, and beggars. Riches (2000, 189) claims that *ptookhos*, along with other Beatitudes (Matt 5.5, 7. 8 and 11), refer to ethical character because they describe a specific mode of behavior related to certain deeds and consequences for which a reward is promised as motivation.

These differences and commonalities indicate the cultural Christian identity of the Matthean community. If both Luke and Matthew redacted materials from Q-source for their independent use, then the commonality between Matthew's and Luke's versions of the Lord's Prayer underscores Matthew's accommodation of earlier traditions of the Jesus Movement. The differences stress the distinctive concerns of the Matthean community. Because of its ethical function, the Beatitude on *πτωχός* performs the function in the Roman empire of inverting the social value that viewed wealth as the cardinal value, earning the elites honor in the society as benefactors, ranked second only to the emperors and their families. Belonging to *e Basileia toon ouranoon* (the kingdom of God) in Matt 5:3 emphasized the role of the Beatitude in contesting the social function of the Roman empire for securing values of honor, including benefaction in the form of according the Kingdom of heaven rather than the earthly kingdom represented by the Roman empire.

### 4.3 Mimicry of Israel's traditions

The Beatitude on the meek (5.5) which Gundry says alludes to the poor, Isa 61.1 is reflective of “but the meek will inherit the earth [land]” in Psalm 37 (Gundry 1982, 69) indicates Matthew’s mimicry of this concept of meekness in Israel’s wisdom narratives. Psalm 37 was written in the time of Babylonian empire, around 600 BCE. This enabled Matthew to see the situation of the Matthean community as similar to Israel’s exile from Babylon. This would have also enabled Matthew to use Psalm 37 in order to advance both a political and social function of the Beatitude on meekness (Matt 5.5) in Antioch. Consequently, inter textually, the application of Psalm 37 in the post-70 context enabled Matthew to contest Roman domination of the land in Syria, while at the same time promising an eschatological reversal whereby God, rather than the Roman emperors and elites, would take control of the land, promising victory against the enemy. Virgil’s myth in *Aeneid* 1.280-281 affirms the eternal status of Rome by claiming that Jupiter appointed Romulus founder of the empire, whereby he declared “For these I set no bounds in space or time; but have given empire without end... [to the] lords of the world” (LCL 63: 280-281). Viewed in this context, the Beatitudes in Matt 5.5 as an allusion to Psalm 37, would ironically be an imitation or mimicry of Roman domination of the land, but enacted by God who would eclipse Rome’s political power.

### 4.4 Borrowing from Jewish Traditions

Matthew borrows the saying “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” in Matt 5:5 from a Jewish tradition embedded in Psalm 37 in his third Beatitude. Inter-textually the Beatitude declaring “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5.5) echoes Psalm 37:

Trust in the Lord, and do good, so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security ...  
Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look well at his place,  
he will not be there. But the meek shall possess the land and delight themselves in  
abundant prosperity (Ps 37.3, 10-11, NRSV).

In this Psalm the “meek” can be characterized as the righteous who shall inherit the earth because of their humility in contrast to the wicked, who shall perish because of their wickedness. It is the “meek” who provide the paradigm of borrowing in Matthew’s Beatitude. This borrowing locates the Matthean Beatitude in relation to Jewish tradition (of Psalm 37) as an element of continuity. Deployment of this Judean tradition in the Matthean community informs their social identity in proximity to Judaeian tradition. By providing a set of norms for the behavior of the Matthean community, Psalm 37 emphasizes the accommodation of a quasi-Judaeian identity in the Matthean community. It seems possible that in proselytizing to Gentiles, the expectation may have been that the converts would become Judaeian followers of the messiah. This quasi-Judaeian identity had the cultural potency of strengthening the superordinate identity in the Matthean community, whereby Judaeian traditions, such as a transformed Sabbath observance (Matt 12.35), would have still been practiced as part of the community’s normative behavior that enhanced social cohesion. Carter’s observation of a multitude of Greeks attending an Antiochene synagogue explains the “hybrid” identity of the

Diaspora Jews and is “an indication of some openness to and participation in the city’s life” (Carter 2011, 292). This accommodation reiterates the social function of Matthew’s emphasis on a quasi-Judaean identity in his community, an issue which escaped the scrutiny of Overman (1990) and Meier (1979, 1991) who could only see a religious, not social or civic function in the Gospel of Matthew.

The above discussion on the Beatitudes about “poor in spirit” (Matt 5.3), the “meek” (5. 5) and acceptance of suffering as exemplified by the prophets (5.11-12), goes beyond Davies and Allison’s conception of their religious function of the Beatitudes. Accordingly, these Beatitudes invert non-monotheistic values on riches to demonstrate identity politics instigated by Matthew (whereby he constructs the cultural identity of the Matthean community). This is in the light of the contestation of politics in the Roman Empire, and in the mimicry of and identification with Israel’s covenantal traditions. Viewed in relation to the socio-economic and political strategies of assimilation in the Roman Empire, this provided the political opportunity for the Beatitudes to negotiate the cultural identity of the Matthean community in the empire. The legitimation of the Matthean community in relation to the Diaspora Judaeans and the Jesus Movement was important not only because of the social capacity to enforce the acceptance of both Judaeans and Gentiles in the Matthean community as followers of Jesus, but also because of the social function of the Beatitudes in negotiating the cultural identity of the community in the context of the Roman political strategy of assimilation. Matthew’s engagement in the fifth Beatitude with the construction and legitimation of the cultural identity of the Matthean community speaks to the socio-political and economic factors of righteousness in 5.20. Since Matthew was addressing a community in Antioch in the late first-century CE, his call to his community to practice a righteousness that exceeded that of the teachers of the law (Scribes) and the Pharisees required him to outline a political, social and economic program that empowered his community without attempting to assimilate them into Roman culture as Judaeans and Gentile elites did. This required them to adopt humble attitudes, represented by “poor in the spirit” and “the meek”, rather than violent attitudes as normative behavior for relating to Judaeans and other members of the Jesus Movement, and the Roman elites. Incidentally, this also presented the socio-economic and political potential to surpass the role of the elites in attending to the needs of a desperate community in Antioch.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The article generates new knowledge regarding use of social identity theory in reading Biblical texts. Social identity theory has been used by scholars such as Philip Esler to read Matthew's Beatitudes as an identity forming discourse on account of the norms that can be derived from it. However, Esler and other users of social identity theory such as Falkner (2005) have not used it to read identity politics from the Beatitudes in terms of the relationship between the Matthean community and the Jesus Movement, late first century Diaspora Judaism and the Roman Empire. Consequently, the Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization theory have had to be modified into Social Identity Political Theory in order to read identity politics from the Beatitudes. Consequently the impact of this modification and development of social identity theory is that it has resulted into two theories that constitute the backbone of Social Identity Political Theory, namely, (1) groups' identity construction takes shape through *recategorization*, formation of a *superordinate identity* and a process *depersonalization* in order to transcend negative aspects of identity such as racism, ethnocentrism, and geographical limitations and, (2) that ideology is applied to legitimate a group's identity by identifying a minor group with a superior one to create a superordinate identity to esteem the image of the minor group. In short, this article has attempted to show the effectiveness of the Social Identity Political Theory (SIPT) in the interpretation of Biblical texts. This has been accomplished first by employing SIPT to reconstruct Matthew's vision of identity politics for his community. Secondly, SIPT has attempted rhetorically to show that, the Matthean Beatitudes not only defines and defends the identity of the Matthean community, but also legitimates by borrowing, mimicking and accommodating traditions from Judaism and the Jesus Movement to contest Roman socio-economic and political values that enforced Rome's beneficence mediated to the populace by the elites. This leads to this question for future research: How does Matthew's borrowing, mimicking and accommodating traditions from Judaism and the Jesus Movement to contest socio-economic and political values meant to enforce Rome's beneficence help us to address social injustice in Africa?

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