Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 10, Special Issue 1 (2021): 40–50

Joseph the Just and Matthew's Matrix of Mercy: The Redefinition of Righteousness

Jonathan T. Pennington

The majority of the world's population today lives surrounded by electric light, making the ancient human habits of stargazing and constellation-recognition harder to find and harder to do. Light pollution and limited experience make it difficult for most people to identify much more than the Big Dipper and a couple of planets. A few years ago, when I was in New Zealand, up near the tip of the North Island, far away from any city, wading in the Southern Hemisphere's warm January ocean, I was able to experience stargazing in a new way. With some guidance, I beheld something few people in North America or Europe have had the privilege of seeing in all its glory—the Southern Cross (the constellation, "Crux"). For those of us who live north of the equator, the Southern Cross is only partially visible in the spring at the latitudes of southern Florida and the tip of Texas. In the southern hemisphere, however, the Southern Cross is their Big Dipper, their South Pole version of the central constellation that guided the native Maori and then, much later, the first Europeans who were sailing south.

This essay is not my misplaced notes for a travelogue presentation at my local observatory, however, but the fruit of my delightful reflections on the role of Scripture in moral theology. I start with this discussion of heavenly bodies as a framing metaphor for the moves in my argument. The constellation metaphor is about coming to see connections that one is not accustomed to see, but that can be discerned with guidance. There are four shining points in Matthew that, when connected, form a constellation—one that we will analogize with the Southern Cross. These four shining stars are recognizable in Matthew by themselves, but as your guide for this exploration, I will take the role of the heavenly docent and point out that when we look at each of these stars in relation to each other we can see that they connect to form something that is more than their individual brightness. The contribution of this essay is not so much to provide something new in any of my four points but rather, out of the thousands of stars in the First Gospel, I will point us to see a connected constellation that will add to our understanding of both Scripture and moral theology.

FOUR HEAVENLY BODIES THAT FORM A MATTHEAN CONSTELLATION OF MORAL THEOLOGY

The bulk of my argument consists in directing our gaze to four observations about Matthew that do not at first appear to be connected, at least not all four together. The first and fourth points concern how the gospels function, starting with what I call the great *paideia* project of the gospels and ending with a brief discussion of how characters in the story serve as moral exemplars. The second and third points concern themes in Matthew—righteousness and mercy—that may seem distinct at first but prove to be mutually-informing concepts in the First Gospel. Together these four shining points in Matthew form a constellation that envisions a particular moral theology.

(1) The Great Paideia Project of the Gospels

The first point of light in our constellation in Matthew comes from the purpose of the Gospels overall, as part of the *paideia* project of the Gospels. When hearing the phrase "*paideia* project" some readers will recall the impressive post-WWII Mortimer Adler/University of Chicago effort to rediscover the Great Books and shape society accordingly, what Adler called *The Paideia Proposal*.[1] Borrowing happily from the Greek tradition, Adler and others crafted a plan to reshape and rebuild post-war American society by focusing on training the sensibilities of young adults through exploring the great ideas—truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, justice.[2] This is *paideia*, the shaping of society by the education of people in particular ways with great ideas. Even though I am talking about the Gospels, not Adler's Great Books, it is no mere coincidence that both of these corpora can be connected to the notion of *paideia*.

What I am referring to is the great *paideia* project by the ultimate Pedagogue, Jesus himself. Central to the moral theology of Scripture is the idea that Jesus is the pedagogue, the pioneer and teacher in righteousness. When we ask the important question, "What is the purpose of the gospels?" I recommend that the simplest and most comprehensive answer is that the gospels are given to the Church to shape and form people to inhabit the world in a certain way based on Jesus's life and teachings. This is *paideia*. Elsewhere I have summed up the gospels with this description:

---

[1] Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

[2] A fascinating account that sets the kind of vision Adler had into a larger intellectual trend of Christian humanism is found in Alan Jacobs's *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

> Our Gospels are the historical, theological, aretegenic (virtue-forming) biographical narratives that retell the story and proclaim the significance of Jesus Christ, who through the power of the Holy Spirit is the Restorer of God's reign.[3]

All three of those opening adjectives are operative and important. "Historical" refers to the gospels making claims about a real person in real time, the in-fleshed Son of God whose entry into human history transformed it. "Theological" refers to the gospels making claims of a profoundly theological nature, revealing who God is; the gospels are not merely history, leaving the theology to Paul and the rest of the New Testament. "Aretegenic" names the purpose of the gospels, namely, to shape people to a way of seeing and being in the world, the life of God-ward, Christ-shaped, kingdom-oriented virtue that alone promises life and life abundantly.

It is this last and ultimate goal that is our focus here. Why does one write a biography (like the gospels) in the ancient world?[4] To record the teaching and actions of a noteworthy person *for the purpose of calling people to be transformed through becoming disciples*. The reason the vast majority of the literary real estate of the New Testament is given to biographical narratives is because the focus of Christianity is first and foremost on a Person, not a set of doctrines and morals abstracted (as important as those also are secondarily)—and a Person whose words and actions instruct and model the proper way of seeing and being for disciples.

We might describe this as a project of individual and corporate re-enculturation into an alternative community, a re-socializing of people to a different set of values, sensibilities, loves, habits, virtues; in short, an invitation to see and be in the world in a certain way. This is discipleship. This is moral theology. This is the great *paideia* project that is at the heart and *telos* of Christianity. I suggest that the Gospels are at the center of this project; they are the first fruits of Scripture, as Origen describes the *Tetraeuangelion*.[5]

This large sun-sized star is the first to highlight as we consider Matthew because, of all the Gospels, Matthew is particularly concerned to present Jesus as a Pedagogue who is forming a people to live

---

[3] Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 35.

[4] New Testament scholarship in the last couple of decades has largely come to agree on the importance of recognizing the similarity of the Gospels to ancient *bioi*, largely influenced by Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (25th Anniversary ed., Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018). See also the recent and comprehensive work of Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

[5] Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.4.

differently in the world. This is emphasized by Matthew's employment of five major blocks of teaching located at crucial places in his narrative—teaching blocks that each provide a locus and focus for training in being a disciple.[6] Understanding this *paideia* project of the Gospels sets the tone for how we read the stories, expecting that they are given to shape our sensibilities, habits, and loves in particular (and often unexpected) ways.

(2) True Righteousness

The second star in the Matthean constellation concerns the question of true righteousness. Human religions and philosophies of all stripes have long asked the question of the good: What is the good and how should one pursue it? Jesus and earliest Christianity have their own answer to this universal human question, typically using the biblical language of "righteousness."

"Righteousness" in the Bible has a semantic range that is large and complex. It can refer to justice in social relations, upstanding behavior, and a position of justified honor.[7] In the Old Testament, *ṣaddîq/ṣədāqâ* often has the idea of restorative justice, understood in the context of covenant with God. This covenantal justice is ultimately God's work of setting the world to right, his saving activity, though we are called to participate in this and are the beneficiaries of it. Related, righteousness—both God's and humanity's—is a matter of honor.[8] Following suit, in the subsequent Tannaitic literature righteousness "is uniformly a term for man's conduct in accord with God's will."[9]

When we turn to the First Gospel we find that righteousness is one of the major themes in Matthew, and that the evangelist is carefully

---

[6] Matthew's five major teaching blocks are identified as (1) Chapters 5–7, (2) Chapter 10, (3) Chapter 13, (4) Chapter 18, and (5) Chapters 23–25.

[7] The following discussion is based on my *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 87–91.

[8] See Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*, EMSDS (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013); Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998); David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000); and Leland White, "Grid and Group in Matthew's Community: The Righteousness/Honor Code in the Sermon on the Mount," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 61–89. White points out that Jesus's disciples and Matthew's hearers are not considered "honorable" in their own society precisely because "the community claims Jesus the crucified as its leader. *Members of the community share the public esteem or blame in which the crucified is held*" (80). The Beatitudes (and the rest of the Sermon) provide a quasi-public forum where the disciples can be seen to be truly the righteous and honorable ones, despite what the society around them says.

[9] Kari Syreeni, *The Making of the Sermon: A Procedural Analysis of Matthew's Redactoral Activity* (Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987), 207, quoted in Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 90.

directing our attention to understand it in a particular way.[10] Within the range of ways in which righteousness can function, Matthew uses it in its natural ethical sense of behavior that is right, in short, "doing the will of God" (Mt 7:21, 24; 12:50; cf. 6:10; 7:12; 18:14; 26:39, 42), the righteousness that is required to enter the kingdom of heaven (5:19–20; 7:21). Mt 21:28–32 is a good example of the concatenation of these overlapping expressions — "doing the will of the father," "entering the kingdom of God," and "the way of righteousness."

In sum, we can define "righteousness" in Matthew as *whole-person behavior that accords with God's nature, will, and coming kingdom*. The "righteous" person, according to Matthew, is the one who follows Jesus in this way of being in the world. The righteous person is the whole (*teleios*) person (5:48) who does not only do the will of God externally but, most importantly, from the heart. This is at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount's teachings and continues throughout Matthew, highlighted again in contrast with the scribes and Pharisees in Mt 23:1–36. When the pious young synagogue leader comes to Jesus and asks about the good, about the righteousness required to be in relationship to God, Jesus affirms the good of the external behavior of the man (keeping the commandments) while also pushing him to the matter of his heart, his loves (Mt 19:16–22). This external plus internal righteousness is once again described as *teleios* (19:21), as the kind of whole-person righteousness God wants for his creatures.

On the one hand, Matthew's emphasis on and description of righteousness is continuous with that of the Hebrew Scriptures. On the other hand, this emphasis on righteousness as *teleios,* as necessarily both external and internal, becomes a point of contention between Jesus and his primary interlocutors, the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus implicitly and explicitly condemns the scribes' and Pharisees' lack of true righteousness because of a cardial problem. They are obeying God's commands and continuing the traditions, but they lack the most important thing—a heart of love for God and love for others, which are the first and second greatest commandments (Mt 22:34–40). Thus, central to Matthew's theology and polemic is a kind of redefinition or clarifying of what righteousness is, particularly on the point of how one treats others in love and mercy. And this leads us to our next point.

[10] The Greek root *dikai-* appears 26 times in Matthew. Very commonly this is about "the righteous ones," an important category of people in Matthew. These righteous ones, or disciples, are often put into contrast with other people and things, such as the unrighteous (*adikous*, 5:45), sinners (*hamartōlous*, 9:13), the evil ones (*ponērous*, 13:49), hypocrisy and lawlessness (*hypokriseōs*, *anomias*, 23:28), and (most interestingly) "those of good repute" (*euōnymōn*, 25:41). See further discussion in my *Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 88–89.

(3) The Matrix of Mercy

With our third heavenly body, the bright theme of mercy, our Matthean constellation begins to take shape. Matthean scholars have offered many options for the major theme in the First Gospel, and there are indeed many good candidates. Strong contenders include fulfillment, righteousness, and discipleship. A theme that is often overlooked initially but proves to be very important is the theme of mercy. Or better than just the singular word, "mercy" is what may be called Matthew's "matrix of mercy"—a series of distinct but deeply overlapping postures of heart and habits of life that Jesus regularly models and commends: *mercy, compassion, forgiveness,* and *love*. We can think of these concepts in a Venn diagram relationship of mercy-compassion-forgiveness, with the overlapping area in the middle as love.

This Matthean matrix of mercy unfolds through several key words and descriptions of Jesus's actions. First is the *eleos* word group. "Mercy" (*eleos*) is the manifestation of a state of heart that makes peace with others, shows compassion toward others, and forgives. It is a generous action that delivers others from some need or bondage. In the Beatitudes, Jesus commends this way of being with the macarisms about showing mercy (5:7) and making peace (5:9). In Matthew 6, one of the spiritual practices to be done with a whole heart is giving alms or showing mercy to those in physical need (6:1–6), the opposite of which is the harsh judging that is condemned in 7:1–5. Mercy typifies Jesus's way of righteousness, especially as it fulfills the second greatest commandment, love for others (22:34–40). Jesus places great weight on showing compassion to others in need as highlighted twice with Matthew's strategic use of Hosea 6:6 (Matt. 9:13; 12:7)—"I desire mercy/compassion, not sacrifice." Additionally, disciples are exhorted to help those in need (6:3; 25:35–36), an exhortation connected to mercy (*eleos*) in terms of the word for "giving alms to the poor" (*eleēmosynēn*). We might think of Matthew's theme of mercy by comparing it to a volume slider on a mixing board—Matthew has turned up the volume on mercy in his theological mix.

Closely related, Matthew regularly emphasizes Jesus's compassion toward others in both emotion and action. Five times in Matthew, Jesus is described with the verb *splanchnizomai*, having compassion (directly in 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; indirectly in 18:27). Jesus's continual healing ministry is a sign of his compassion. By way of contrast, Jesus's conflict with his self-appointed enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, often centers on their lack of compassion for others (12:1–14; 23:4, 23). As Dale Allison points out, Jesus puts much emphasis on showing mercy to others—both in commanding it (9:13; 12:7; 23:23; 18:21–35; 25:31–46) and modeling it (9:27–31; 15:21–28; 7:14–18;

20:29–34). In this he stands in the biblical and Jewish tradition which places compassion "near the center of the moral life."[11]

Also, part of this matrix of mercy is the Matthean emphasis on forgiveness toward others. Jesus repeatedly speaks of the necessity and beauty of forgiving other people who have sinned against us (6:14–15; 18:15–20, 35), often tying it inextricably to receiving forgiveness from God himself. Forgiveness toward those who have wronged us is central to being a disciple of Jesus because it is living in the way that God himself does, forgiving others and making the sun and rain come upon all people, even the wicked (5:45).

As it relates to the argument of this essay, the point is to highlight this commonly overlooked star in Matthew—a deeply-embedded and widely-woven matrix of mercy. Put together with Matthew's goal in reshaping disciples' sensibilities and the theme of righteousness, the theme of mercy provides a third point that begins to bring our constellation into a recognizable shape. There is one more star for the picture to become clear.

(4) Characters as Exemplars

We noted above that the purpose of ancient biographies was intentionally to shape the sensibilities and habits of would-be disciples. The reason biographies are particularly important as a tool for formation is because, more powerfully than providing precepts and moral instructions in didactic form, human examples deeply shape character. As Seneca said it, "The way is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful if one follows patterns."[12]

Matthew is full of characters that are meant to serve as short and effective examples. While there are current debates both within and outside of biblical studies about the proper methodology and conceptualization of the function of characters in stories, there is still benefit in an older categorization that goes back to E.M. Forster.[13] This approach classifies narrative characters into two types—*flat* and *round*. Flat characters are types who undergo no development and whose internal processes are not usually discussed. Instead, they serve as foils or simple exemplars, as a supporting cast to the main characters and events. Round characters, by contrast, do undergo development. They learn, change, grow, and, depending on the era of the writers, we may get to peek into the internal psychology of such characters. One current scholar in characterization studies is Cornelis Bennema, who appreciates the value of this scheme of flat and round characters, and

[11] Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 50.
[12] Seneca, *Ad Lucilium* 6.5, trans. Richard Gummere (Harvard University Press, 1917), 25.
[13] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt & Brace, 1927).

recommends we think in terms of a spectrum—with flat and round characters on either end and other characters often serving some in between role (oblong?).[14]

In Matthew there are many flat characters on both sides of Jesus who serve as examples both good and bad. These include people of great faith such as the Canaanite woman, the centurion who seeks Jesus for healing, and the two blind men. The primary negative flat characters are the scribes and Pharisees, who consistently play the role as foils to Jesus's teaching and example. The principal round characters in Matthew are the twelve disciples, but especially Peter, who plays an increasingly important role as the narrative progresses and who develops through failures and successes.

Paying attention to the characters in Matthew is important not just as part of a literary analysis, but especially for how the characters function as moral examples, both good and bad. Even though modern literary analysis is less likely to make any moral claims based on how characters function, there is no doubt that in their ancient context, this is how characters function in biographies: as exemplars of virtue and vice. These characters are models for the purpose of shaping the character of readers, not only by the power of example, but also in articulating and clarifying what are the vices and virtues that are to be avoided and adopted.

THE CONSTELLATION – WHOSE PICTURE?

With these four star-points identified—the *paideia* project of the Gospels, the themes of righteousness and mercy, and Matthean characters as exemplars—we can begin to discern that there is a pattern, a discernible constellation. The question is what image the constellation presents, or better, whose picture is it?

A good Christian answer to this question will always be Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus is the ultimate exemplar, the one who fulfills all righteousness (5:17), the one fully-pleasing-to-God beloved Son (3:17), who is full of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, serving as the Model and Pioneer of the faith.

But while Jesus is the ultimate moral exemplar, there are other exemplars that Holy Scripture provides. He is the first-born of many brothers and sisters (Rom 8:29). As the Gospel of Matthew unfolds it is noteworthy to observe that the first characters we meet after the prefatory genealogy (Mt 1:1–17) are Joseph and Mary. Mary is mentioned first and that is significant (1:18), but Matthew focuses the narrative not on Mary (as does Luke) but on Joseph. While Joseph never speaks, he is the first active character of Matthew (and therefore of the canonical New Testament).

---

[14] Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014).

If we were to engage in a "quest for the historical Joseph," we would have an arduous task, not because he is unimportant to Christian tradition but because of various lines of interpretation that gather to Joseph by accretion over the centuries. Joseph as a character appears only briefly in the opening of Matthew and Luke but then vanishes from the narratives.[15] Naturally, Christian tradition was not content with such a paucity of information and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* regarding Joseph is rich in the non-canonical literature as well as sacred art.[16] From the biblical texts we understand that Joseph was recognized as the legal father of Jesus (Lk 2:4–7, 22–24; Jn 1:45; 6:42), though not the biological (Mt 1:20–25). Like his namesake in Genesis (Gen 37, 40–41), he was the recipient of angelic revelation and direction via dreams (Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19–23).[17] He was a *tektōn*, a craftsman in wood or stone, which according to the Talmud could also be a metaphor for a man learned in the Law.[18] While he is not explicitly mentioned in Matthew 19, Joseph is likely also in view when Jesus provides the exception clause for a justified divorce for the case of immorality (19:9) and the high calling of being a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven (19:12).

The most important description of Joseph is found in what Matthew identifies as the ground for his actions regarding Mary. Joseph was "righteous": "Joseph her husband, because he was a righteous man and did not desire to shame her, planned to divorce her quietly."[19]

---

[15] He is referenced as the father of Jesus in a number of subsequent texts (Mt 13:55; Lk 4:22) and twice early in the Gospel of John when Jesus is being introduced (Jn 1:45, 6:42). It is often assumed that Joseph died when Jesus is young, and this explains why he does not appear as a character in any other Gospel episodes. While this is possible, it should be noted that the references to Jesus as the son of Joseph that occur when Jesus is an adult are in the present tense (Mt 13:55; Lk 4:22; Jn 6:42) and could be read as referring to current knowledge of Joseph, not just past knowledge of him. The evidence in the New Testament is inconclusive.

[16] Joseph appears as a character in The Infancy Gospel of James, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the History of Joseph the Carpenter, and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, in addition to countless works of visual art. For a detailed survey, see Philip Walker Jacobs, "The Reception History and Interpretation of the New Testament Portrayals of Joseph the Carpenter in Nativity and Infancy Portrayals in Early Christian and Early Medieval Narratives and Art from the Second Century to the Ninth Century CE," (PhD Dissertation, Bangor University, 2013).

[17] Joseph Fitzmyer explores the portrayal of Joseph in both Matthew and Luke, including drawing parallels between Joseph the husband of Mary and the Joseph of Genesis as "guardians" who provide safety for Israel. Joseph Fitzmyer, *Saint Joseph in Matthew's Gospel* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 1997), 2–4, 12, 17–20.

[18] This is Géza Vermès's suggestion, based on the observation that in the Talmud, "carpenter" and "son of a carpenter" were used to signify a Torah-learned man. Géza Vermès, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Collins, 1973), 21–22.

[19] Author's English translation. The Greek reads: Ἰωσὴφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν δειγματίσαι, ἐβουλήθη λάθρᾳ ἀπολῦσαι αὐτήν (Matt. 1:19).

Crucial to understanding the significance of this description is attention to the Greek participial phrase, δίκαιος ὢν. Some English translations interpret this participle as concessive, thus rendering the phrase, "although he was a righteous man." While this is a possible translation, much better is the causal rendering: "because he was a righteous man." The logic of Matthew's description, in accord with his theological emphases, is that Joseph's righteousness is manifested through his merciful and compassionate attitude toward Mary, who as far as he knows (the angel has not yet appeared to him) has been unfaithful to him. Joseph is righteous in the way that Jesus will go on throughout Matthew to define righteousness—as marked by the highest virtue of a compassionate, forgiving, and merciful love toward others. Rather than dragging Mary before the village and demanding her stoning or other punishment, the wrongly treated Joseph desires to *not* put her to shame but rather to end their betrothal with a quiet, unexplained termination. Some—such as the flat characters of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew—may be inclined to interpret righteousness as focusing on justice and rights, condemning those who have done wrong according to God's Law. But Joseph stands as the first exemplar in Matthew's Gospel of a deeper truth—that mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love are the greatest commandments and therefore, the greatest righteousness.

We do not find a great number of scholars wrestling with what the nature of Joseph's righteousness was, and this lacuna means that Joseph's role in Matthew's moral theology is often missed. One scholar who did ask the question is Dan Via. In his article about how the narrative of Matthew teaches ethics, Via suggests that Joseph's righteousness inclines him to obey the law and have Mary stoned, but that this is qualified by his compassion. Additionally, Joseph's character is shown in that he has the flexibility and openness to change his understanding of what God requires of him based on revelation.[20] Thus, Joseph's righteousness is exemplified as an existential openness to be instructed by God in doing what is right. Via's reflections here are typical of his thoughtful and challenging structuralist and existential reading of the biblical texts.[21] However, in this case there is something more profound and Matthew-wide that is going on. *Jesus is redefining righteousness as mercy, kindness, compassion, and love.* Joseph serves as the first example of this newly defined righteousness that is intended to re-orient the moral theology of the Christian community in Matthew's day and throughout the history of the Church.

---

[20] Dan O. Via, "Narrative World and Ethical Response: The Marvelous and Righteousness in Matthew 1–2," *Semeia* 12 (1978), 136–137.

[21] See also Dan O. Via, *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990).

Fast forward a few decades in the narrative and the adult Jesus will commend the very virtues that Joseph manifests here, such as practicing mercy over justice (5:7—Blessed are the merciful; "I desire mercy not sacrifice" 9:13; 12:7, the latter two quoting Hos 6:6), and practicing his righteousness in secret rather than for the praise of others (6:4, 6, 18). Additionally, when Jesus says in 5:20 that people need to have a righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees, readers have already in the first story of the Gospel an exemplar of this way of inhabiting the world.

CONCLUSION

For Christians, Holy Scripture has always been the primary source for moral theology, not only in giving explicit commands and prohibitions but also in providing a rich panoply of characters who serve as exemplars of virtue and vices to be avoided. This includes round and primary characters such as Peter, Paul, and Jesus himself. It also includes flat and secondary characters who may not seem to play a significant role, but who serve as clear and powerful pictures of particular virtues or vices.

Joseph, the husband of Mary, does not take up much literary space in the Gospel of Matthew, but his role in the moral theology of the book is great. We may be tempted to think of him as only a flat character because his story is so compressed, but Joseph does undergo growth in understanding. Even though he disappears after the prologue to the story, Joseph's significance is highlighted by being the first active character in the story. Moreover, the particular virtue that he exemplifies, righteousness manifested as mercy, does not seem overly significant at first. But as Jesus's teachings and actions unfold throughout the narrative, it turns out to be central to Matthew's theology. Joseph proves to be the exemplar who sets the tone for Jesus's primary moral teaching—that to enter the kingdom of heaven one must have a righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), a righteousness marked by mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, who sat under the Star of Bethlehem and beheld its wondrous glory, is rightly seen as a constellation in Matthew's heavenly picture of moral theology.

Jonathan T. Pennington, who holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from the University of St. Andrews (Scotland), is associate professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Pennington is the author of *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, and *Heaven and Earth In the Gospel of Matthew*.