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THEN THEY UNDERSTOOD:
A NARRATIVE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF MATTHEW 16:12 AND 17:13

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THEN THEY UNDERSTOOD:
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To the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ICC	International Critical Commentary
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary

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PREFACE

This thesis is in some ways its own illustration. As Jesus demonstrated his perfect patience toward eleven men who only haltingly understood his clear instruction, so those who have overseen the development of this thesis must have thought at times, “How is it that you fail to understand?” Proposals for a thesis ranged from adventures in textual criticism to unlikely guesses about what was happening in the historical Matthew’s head. But after receiving many corrections that were many times gentler and more reassuring than the situation merited, I hope it may be said of me what was said of the eleven: “then he understood.”

Of those required to participate in this object lesson, my first thanks go to Trey Moss, one-time Assistant Director of Research Doctoral Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who beheld the least promising of my proposals and gently nudged me onto the right track. I suppose that his influence on me was multiplied several times by the fact that he was the first postgraduate research role model I encountered. My thanks are also due to Dr. Pennington, one-time Director of Research Doctoral Studies at Southern and my faculty supervisor, who despite his academic depth never made me feel (more than necessary) that I was only splashing in academic puddles. My determination to change emphasis to New Testament studies was due only in part to my love for the subject; the larger dose of motivation came from the fact that Dr. Pennington would then be my supervisor.

Finally, I would commit a great wrong if I failed to mention the only fellowship of believers I have known since I was born anew: Faith Bible Church, who have invested dollars in my education which they could easily have found other good

uses for. I take this as evidence of their hunger for the word, and their love for me. And my wife Michaela. Though no one else may know the sacrifices you make so that I may serve others, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis wishes to say something important about a small feature of the Gospel of Matthew—namely, the formula that occurs in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13: τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι. Although often overlooked in commentaries and other scholarly works, this formula appears in a pivotal part of Matthew’s narrative and contributes to the narrative’s progress. What is more, the formula closely pertains to one of the Gospel’s major themes—discernment of revelation—such that our understanding of the narrative, the theme, and consequently, the book would be deficient without it.

I will argue in this thesis that Matthew’s implied author uses the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 to exemplify positively for the implied reader the activity of discerning divine revelation. Matthew as a whole emphasizes the two sides of discerning revelation: givenness and reception.¹ These sides are again brought to the forefront in Matthew 16:5–17:13, the section bracketed by the formula under consideration. The Father *gives* revelation through his Son and enables its discernment by the disciples (e.g. Matt 16:17), but the disciples also must *receive* that revelation and may at times, therefore, fail to do so (e.g. v. 23). When the formula “then they understood” occurs, the implied reader witnesses the concursion of divine givenness and human reception that is the model for how disciples come to understand spiritual realities.²

¹ See the “Review of the Literature” below, especially Dan O. Via and Frances Shaw’s contributions under “Thematic Works.”

² Jeannine K. Brown has pointed out the problem of assuming, rather than defining, the relationship between the portrayal and function of the Matthean disciples. I will not be solving the problem in this short thesis; Brown does not solve it in her book either, although she does appeal to the three-tiered reading model of Kari Syreeni to give some clarity to the discussion. According to Syreeni’s framework, my primary foci in this thesis will be on the textual world of Matthew (How does the implied author affect

Someone may wonder what the best methodology is for the end sought by this thesis. Since Matthew alone of the Synoptics includes this formula at the conclusion of his two pericopae in Matthew 16:5–12 and 17:9–13—pericopae paralleled in Mark—would redaction criticism not be the most appropriate discipline? No doubt a study of the redaction of these passages would be fruitful, but such a study would run the risk of missing the narrator’s literary technique of repetition, a feature obviously present in the final form of the text, in favor of an important but more speculative idea about what the historical redactor was intending.³ New Testament scholarship benefits from all approaches, but the discipline of narrative criticism gives the literary features of the final form of the text their full weight. Done well, a narrative-critical study will work together with the insights of redactional and other historical studies toward a more holistic understanding of Matthew.⁴ This thesis, therefore, will employ a narrative-critical approach.

Someone may also wonder if the focus of this thesis is too narrow, dealing as it does with no more than two verses. But as I will show, these two verses are not throw-away; they touch the very heart of one of Matthew’s most important themes—discernment of revelation—and they do so at a revelatory “peak.”⁵ The context of 16:12 and 17:13, their place in Matthew’s plot, their theme, and their usefulness to the characterization of the Matthean disciples conspire to lend them an importance

the implied reader?) and then the symbolic world (What does the portrayal of the disciples tell us about Matthew’s view of discipleship?). Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples*, Academia Biblica 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 33–34.

³ For narrative criticism’s focus on a “narrator” rather than a “redactor,” see Mark Allan Powell, “Toward a Narrative-Critical Understanding of Matthew,” *Interpretation* 46, no. 4 (1992), 342.

⁴ In fact, the current narrative-critical study seeks to support previous redaction-critical conclusions about discernment of revelation in Matthew—namely, that the disciples’ understanding is portrayed positively.

⁵ Frances Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, Religions and Discourse 30 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 76–77 (citing Luz).

disproportionate to their brevity. What the formula of these verses communicates affects how we read the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

In order to defend my thesis, I will need to accomplish two tasks. First, the implied author's larger conception of how divine revelation is discerned must be drawn from relevant passages in his Gospel. This thesis will accomplish this in two stages: by analyzing two key passages from earlier in the text, at 11:25–30 and 13:10–17; and by focusing in on the section that contains the formula, at 16:5–17:13. Secondly, the formula itself must be analyzed in its two occurrences, and the thesis demonstrated.

Review of the Literature

An effective narrative-critical analysis of these verses will rely first on the text of Matthew—an emphasis that accounts for the birth of the discipline—but secondly on the labors of New Testament scholars. Works with relevance for this thesis may be divided into four categories: structural works, thematic works, narrative-critical works, and exegetical works. Of course, substantial overlap exists between these categories and some works will fit under more than one of them; still, the headings provide a sense of order.

What I hope to accomplish in the first two sections below—structural and thematic works—is to introduce the structure of Matthew, since structure will feature prominently in the argument I make in the body of this thesis. The review of thematic works will also touch on the idea of revelatory givenness and reception, an idea to which I will return and upon which my thesis will depend. The final two sections—narrative-critical and exegetical works—are meant mainly to demonstrate the lacuna in Matthean studies that this thesis fills.

Structural Works

As noted above, a study of narrative will lean heavily on a narrative's structure, and so a consideration of how scholars have analyzed Matthew's literary structure is in

order.⁶ Prior to 1930, few scholars gave careful heed to the literary structure of Matthew, opting instead to see in this Gospel a structure based on time and place (usually like Mark's Gospel, from north to south) or concept (usually salvation history, from Israel to the church). In 1930, Benjamin Wisner Bacon published *Studies in Matthew* and changed the way scholars approached Matthew's structure.⁷ He observed that the formula καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) occurred at the end of five major blocks of discourse (5–7; 10; 13; 18; 23–25). Although subsequent scholars have been less enthusiastic about his association of these sections (and their attendant narratives) with the five books of Moses, most have agreed upon the importance of the five major Matthean discourses.⁸

Unfortunately, it is not obvious how Matthew's major discourse blocks relate to the overall structure of the Gospel. For example, should one pair each discourse with the narrative before it, the narrative after it, or some combination of the two?⁹ The most appealing proposals are flexible, giving appropriate space for these discourse blocks within and alongside the flow of Matthew's plot, and respecting some of the chronological, spatial, and conceptual interests of previous scholarship.¹⁰

⁶ See David R. Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God: An Introduction to Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 132–172, Kindle; Jonathan T. Pennington, "Revelatory Epistemology in the Gospel according to Matthew in Dialogue with Francis Watson's 'Canonical Perspective,'" in *Writing the Gospels: A Dialogue with Francis Watson*, ed. Catherine Sider Hamilton and Joel Willitts (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 105–8.

⁷ Benjamin W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930).

⁸ Though some dispute the range of individual discourses or the number of discourses in Matthew.

⁹ For an example of pairing each discourse with the narrative *before* it, see Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*; of pairing each discourse with the narrative *after* it, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 1:58–72; of a combination of the two, see Pennington, "Revelatory Epistemology," 107–8.

¹⁰ Pennington summarizes the common view of scholar's today: "most Matthean scholars today would recognize the benefit of some combination of these approaches [the major-discourse approach and the plot-structure approach]: Matthew is a narrative with a plot that is interwoven with these blocks of dominical teaching." Pennington, "Revelatory Epistemology," 106.

Kingsbury turns the discussion of structure in a more strictly literary direction when he notes another formulaic feature of Matthew: ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς at 4:17 and 16:21.¹¹ On the basis of this formula, Kingsbury divides the plot of Matthew into three parts: “(I) The Presentation of Jesus Messiah (1:1–4:16); (II) The Ministry of Jesus Messiah to Israel and Israel’s Repudiation of Jesus (4:17–16:20); and (III) the Journey of Jesus Messiah to Jerusalem and His Suffering, Death, and Resurrection (16:21–28:20).”¹² Kingsbury assumes the five discourses but focuses his narrative criticism on this literary structure which more clearly attends to the story of Matthew and more clearly sets Jesus at the center of that story. His emphasis away from the discourses is common among narrative critics who, according to Mark Allan Powell, “have been less inclined than redaction critics to grant primary structural significance to the five discourses.”¹³

It is also worth noting that Combrink discerned within Matthew an overall chiasmic structure with chapter 13 as its center and turning point, and with 11:2–16:20 as a “larger turning area.”¹⁴ Chiasmic approaches to Matthew are not popular—Bauer concludes that “we can understand why almost no scholars have adopted a concentric understanding of the Gospel of Matthew,” before adding that these proposals have at least drawn attention to smaller chiasms in the gospel and to parallels between the beginning and end of the gospel.¹⁵ I will argue however that such chiasmic proposals, though

¹¹ Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel and His Concept of Salvation-History,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1973): 451–74; Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 1–25; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 40–42. Kingsbury is indebted to the earlier scholarship of E. Lohmyer and N. B. Stonehouse, who gave great weight to the formula at 4:17 and 16:21.

¹² Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 40.

¹³ Powell, “Toward a Narrative-Critical Understanding of Matthew,” 344.

¹⁴ H. J. Bernard Combrink, “The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983): 71. Davies and Allison categorize chiasmic approaches to Matthew’s structure under C. H. Lohr and provide, in a footnote, several other scholars who argue for a Matthean chiasmic structure, Combrink included. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:60.

¹⁵ Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*, 156.

ultimately unconvincing, have one more value: they draw attention to the literary and theological significance of chapter 13 and its narrative surroundings, the “larger turning area” of Combrink.¹⁶

Thematic Works

The themes most closely tied to Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 are revelation and discernment of revelation, so here I will discuss a few important works on these themes, especially as they relate to Matthew; additionally, I will make a few more introductory remarks about Matthean structure on the basis of these works.¹⁷ A good starting place on the subject of revelation in Matthew is Gerhard Barth’s important essay, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law.”¹⁸ Barth, interested in the redaction of Matthew, observed the high frequency of revelatory terminology in Matthew over against Mark and claimed that Matthew had adjusted his sources to emphasize the disciples’ developing *pre-Easter* understanding.¹⁹ Hence, in the view of Barth and subsequent scholars, the disciples’ faltering but growing discernment of revelation is a special emphasis of Matthew’s Gospel. Both Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 are excellent examples of this emphasis.

Dan O. Via’s *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament* draws attention to the two sides of revelation: its givenness and its reception.²⁰

¹⁶ Those chiasmic approaches which find their center elsewhere obviously do not provide this value.

¹⁷ I will be using the terms “theme” and “motif” almost interchangeably in this thesis. It seems to me that they are differentiated by the degree of significance obvious in the thing or idea in view. So, “bread” would be a motif in Matthew because what significance bread conveys is not obvious nor uniform throughout the Gospel, while “discipleship” would be a theme because its significance is more obvious and uniform throughout the Gospel. However, scholars are inconsistent in how they use these terms. Frances Shaw is careful to call her study an analysis of the “motif” of discernment of revelation in Matthew, but sometimes the word “theme” slips in instead. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 42 and 45 (“motif”), 26 and 35 (“theme”).

¹⁸ Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, trans. Perry Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 58–164.

¹⁹ Pennintgon, “Revelatory Epistemology,” 113–14.

²⁰ Dan O. Via, *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament*

He dedicates a chapter to Matthew, but centers most of his argument around a single pericope: Matthew 6:22–23 (“The eye is the lamp of the body . . .”). Matthew, he asserts, is more pessimistic than Mark about what humans can understand as humans, but more optimistic about what the disciples are able to comprehend through revelation; Matthew sees all humanity as unable to discern God’s revelation in Jesus, but perceives God as overcoming that inability in the disciples. He offers Matthew 16:12 as an example of this redactional difference, since Mark’s harsh criticism of the disciples and the implication that they do not understand the meaning of the leaven is replaced by Matthew’s milder criticism and added statement, “Then they understood.”²¹

The most important thematic work for this thesis, however, is Frances Shaw’s *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, a book-length treatment of the motif most present in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. Like Via, Shaw observes the two parts of revelation in Matthew, its givenness and its reception. Discernment is both a gift of God and something that must be exercised by people. The second chapter of her work demonstrates that discernment of revelation is a major motif in Matthew by tracing it through the Gospel; her own outline of Matthew labels 10:1–17:13 as “Response to Jesus’s mission” and, like Combrink, she considers 11:2 to 16:28 a “major turning area of the narrative.”²² Additionally, Shaw argues that Matthew arranged his material to lead up to the discernment peak in Peter’s confession at 16:16, and the Christological revelation peak in the transfiguration at 17:1–8.²³ These are important observations, since 16:12 and

(Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). The term “givenness” is employed by Shaw rather than Via, though it captures well what Via intends. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 17. Shaw is critical of Via’s work, since it puts too much weight on a reconstructed historical situation, a reconstructed historical author, and a single pericope. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 30–31.

²¹ Via, *The Revelation of God*, 140.

²² Combrink ends the turning area at 16:20, which Shaw acknowledges in a footnote. Shaw, *Discernment*, 60n43.

²³ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 73, 76.

17:13 immediately surround the pericopae which are or contain these revelatory peaks.

The third chapter of *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew* finds Old Testament precedents for the view of revelation and discernment that Matthew assumes, such as the dual notions of the God-ward and the human side of discernment.²⁴ Following is a chapter on the motif of discernment in early Jewish literature.²⁵ And then, at the heart of the book, Shaw offers three chapters on the kinds of discernment encountered in Matthew: model discernment in Jesus, fragile discernment in Peter, and failed discernment in the birth and passion narratives. The chapter on Peter focuses on 16:13-20, putting it quite close to the verses addressed in this thesis, both in literary location and in theme. But as with other authors, Shaw touches on 16:12 and 17:13 only in passing.²⁶ Although these are remarkable verses lexically (“understood”), thematically (discernment), and literarily (placement and repetition), they again receive short treatment.

Lastly, Wim J. C. Weren includes in his 2014 collection of Matthean essays one essay entitled, “Secret Knowledge and Divine Revelation in Matthew’s Gospel.”²⁷ Although a thematic study, Weren’s essay contributes to the structural argument I will be making in this thesis; for of the four key Matthean texts on revelation that Weren analyzes, three (11:25–30; 13:10–17; 16:13–28) appear in Matthew 13 and its narrative context, roughly the “turning area” of Combrink. Beyond this Weren offers little that directly addresses the formula considered in this thesis. He does pause to speak directly

²⁴ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 113.

²⁵ Worthy of note is Shaw’s comparison of Matthew and the Qumran writings, both of which contain the twin motifs of “revelation and separation.” Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 144, 149–51. For a more thorough discussion of these motifs in Matthew, see Pennington, “Revelatory Epistemology.”

²⁶ E.g. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 270.

²⁷ W. J. C. Weren, “Secret Knowledge and Divine Revelation in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *Studies in Matthew’s Gospel: Literary Design, Intertextuality, and Social Setting*, Biblical Interpretation 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 52–70.

of 16:12, but skips over the formula and considers only the religious leaders mentioned in the verse.²⁸

Narrative-Critical Works

Having noted the structure and revelatory themes of Matthew, this review of the literature will now note the paucity of commentary on Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 in narrative-critical and exegetical works. And since narrative criticism is the methodology of this thesis, we will first ask how narrative critics of Matthew's Gospel have handled the formula in these two verses. The only direct discussion of either of these verses in Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story* appears under the heading "The Disciples as the Recipients of Divine Revelation."²⁹ In a paragraph about the pericope of 16:5–12 Kingsbury writes, "Indeed, not until Jesus has explained himself do the disciples finally grasp the warning he is giving them (16:9–12)."³⁰ Janice Capel Anderson's extensive work on repetitions in the narrative of Matthew, *Matthew's Narrative Web*, surprisingly never mentions the repetition found in 16:12 and 17:13.³¹ In her article "Double and Triple Stories, the Implied Reader, and Redundancy in Matthew," she considers the two feeding stories in Matthew (14:13–21; 15:32–39) and implies that they, under the broader bread motif, come to their climax in 16:5–12 and help to convey the idea of "the disciples in transit . . . to true discipleship"; but again she makes no explicit connection between the repetition in 16:12 and 17:13.³²

²⁸ Weren, "Secret Knowledge," 64.

²⁹ Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 136–39.

³⁰ Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 138.

³¹ All of these references except one (150) occur in lists, footnotes, or brief observations having more to do with the religious leaders ("the Pharisees and Sadducees" of 16:12) or John the Baptist (17:13). Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again*, Library of New Testament Studies, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 91 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 72, 87, 97, 100, 150, 162 (the reference to "12d" on the previous page was wrongly indexed as 16:12d, rather than 17:12d), 174.

³² Janice Capel Anderson, "Double and Triple Stories, the Implied Reader, and Redundancy in

Another important narrative-critical work for the subject of this thesis is Jeannine K. Brown's *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*.³³ Brown is a trained redaction critic who offers her book as a bridge between redaction and narrative criticism in regard to the characterization of the Matthean disciples. By focusing on the indirect characterization of the disciples in 16:21–20:28, Brown comes to a conclusion that differs from that of many redaction and narrative critics, namely, that the disciples' ability to understand is portrayed by Matthew in a largely negative way. This conclusion calls into question the common view that Matthew highlights Jesus's effectiveness as a teacher, evident in the progress that the disciples make in understanding. Brown argues instead that the disciples' portrayal as *unable* to understand highlights Jesus's "effective presence" after the resurrection, not his effective teaching before.

Given Brown's redactional and narrative-critical interest in the disciples' discernment of revelation in Matthew, how does she handle the formula considered in this thesis? Because her work is focused on 16:21–20:28, only the second instance of the formula at 17:13 falls within the scope of her work, and she does indeed address that instance of it in two paragraphs.³⁴ She argues that although redaction critics have generally taken this verse as evidence that the disciples understand Jesus's message and mission, the verse does not claim that much. Matthew states that the disciples understood one very specific part of Jesus's message: that by "Elijah" in verses 11–12 Jesus was referring to John the Baptist. Therefore, argues Brown, the formula in 17:13 should not be used to discern an overall positive portrayal of the Matthean disciples' ability to understand Jesus and his message. Later Brown notes in a single sentence that "if only direct characterization is taken into account, it would be easy to conclude that the

Matthew," *Semeia* 31 (1985), 80–82.

³³ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*.

³⁴ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 63–64.

Matthean disciples are portrayed as possessing understanding (cf. 16:12 and 17:13).³⁵ In an attached footnote, Brown reiterates that in both of these verses Matthew is only referring to a very specific and limited sort of comprehension, and in another footnote a few pages later she makes the same point in reference to 16:12.³⁶ Beyond these few places and except to make this one point, Brown does not address the formula in 16:12 and 17:13.³⁷

Exegetical Works

The final works to be considered in this brief review of the literature are exegetical; here I consider how a sampling of scholarly Matthean commentaries handle Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. The first commentary is Davies and Allison's contribution to the International Critical Commentary series, a three-volume work which began to be published in 1988.³⁸ In the second of these volumes the authors touch lightly on 16:12 in considering the differences between the pericope of 16:5–12 and its Markan parallel, and offer only a few brief sentences of comment on the verse itself, almost exclusively on the meaning of διδασχί.³⁹ And just as the comment here points forward to 17:13 with a mere “[c]ompare,” so 17:13 points back to 16:12 with “compare the redactional 16:12” and “also concluding a paragraph.”⁴⁰ However, in the introductory material of Davies and Allison's first volume, they do list 16:12 and 17:13 under a discussion of the literary

³⁵ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 107.

³⁶ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 107n45, 109n54.

³⁷ Another important narrative-critical work for this thesis is Richard A. Edwards, *Matthew's Narrative Portrait of Disciples: How the Text-Connoted Reader Is Informed* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). For the sake of space, his work will be referenced in the body of this thesis rather than treated here.

³⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*.

³⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:577–84.

⁴⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:716.

characteristic of repetition in Matthew as an instance of “twofold or threefold repetition of similar or identical words or phrases not in close proximity, excluding doublets.”⁴¹

The second commentary we consider is that by Ulrich Luz in the *Hermeneia* series.⁴² Like Davies and Allison, Luz touches on 16:12 in discussing the differences between the parallel gospel accounts, and briefly comments on the verse itself with the assertion that Matthew conveys “that the disciples do not remain lacking in understanding as in Mark, but, as in 13:11–23*, 36–50* and 15:15–20*, they come to understanding through Jesus.”⁴³ The same may be said of 17:13 in its discussion of the Markan parallel, but in its direct comment it does make a few important observations:

In v. 13* Matthew recalls this [that John the Baptist is Elijah, see 11:10, 14] once more and thus again makes clear how it is through the “instruction” of Jesus that the disciples come to understanding. Contrasted with them are the Jewish opponents who “have” not “recognized” who John was and “did with him what they wanted.”⁴⁴

The disciples discern through the external testimony of Jesus, and this discernment sets them apart from those who do not discern.

Lastly, John Nolland writes on this thesis’s two verses in his contribution to the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*.⁴⁵ He does not mention 16:12 or 17:13 in his notes on narrative technique in the introduction of his book, though they would fall under the first of the techniques listed, “Repetition of Formulas.”⁴⁶ However, when he comes to the first of these verses in the course of his commentary he provides the most thorough treatment of them so far. At 16:12 he writes the following: “As in the

⁴¹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:90–91.

⁴² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch., 3 vols., *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001–2007).

⁴³ Luz, *Matthew*, 349–51.

⁴⁴ Luz, *Matthew*, 400.

⁴⁵ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 23–24.

development leading to 13:51, Jesus's clear explanation contributes to a final clear understanding, but here the journey to understanding has been more difficult. Another journey to understanding will be described in 17:9–13.⁴⁷ At 17:13 he merely notes that here, as in 16:12, there is an editorial comment about the disciples' discernment, and then he turns the discussion to John the Baptist.⁴⁸ Clearly the treatment of 16:12 and 17:13 in these commentaries is bare, with little attempt made to explain why Matthew would utilize a formula in these two places or what that formula contributes to the narrative.

Conclusion

Besides introducing the structure and themes of Matthew that will support my thesis, what this short review of the literature shows is that the formula shared by Matthew 16:12 and 17:13, though situated in a pivotal part of the overall narrative of Matthew and related to one of Matthew's most important themes, has not been thoroughly analyzed in relation to the narrative. This thesis's modest aim is to fill this gap in Matthean scholarship by means of a narrative-critical analysis of the formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι.

⁴⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 654.

⁴⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 709.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

This chapter will consider the context of the formula found in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13, from broad (all of Matthew's prior narrative) to narrow (the immediate context in 16:5–17:13). Others have argued more generally for a particular portrayal of the Matthean disciples or their understanding, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis.¹ Instead, I will consider at length how the implied author of Matthew portrays the understanding of the disciples in two passages that are representative of the whole: 11:25–30 and 13:10–17. Then I will show, more briefly, how the immediate context of the formula in 16:5–17:13 prepares the implied reader for the formula itself. In both cases the formula will be in view and will decide what aspects of Matthean thought this thesis emphasizes.

The Broad Context

A narrative-critical analysis of Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 requires a sense of the Gospel's structure overall. The previous chapter laid a foundation by noting how scholars, both redactional and narrative-critical, tend to see that structure. The current chapter moves from general to specific. Here we will consider Matthew's structure *in light of* Matthew 16:12 and 17:13, searching for ways the implied author prepares his reader for the formula of those verses. Consequently, we will be most interested in how

¹ See, for example, Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples*, *Academia Biblica* 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Frances Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, *Religions and Discourse* 30 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

the implied author treats the theme of discernment of revelation in his text, and to that end we will focus on the two earlier passages in Matthew most centered on that theme: 11:25–30 and 13:10–17.

Matthew 11:25–30

As Matthew's Gospel gets underway, the implied reader quickly learns to attach the character of Jesus to divine revelation. The very first line draws on Old Testament revelation by harkening back to the *Toledot* formula of Genesis (βίβλος γενέσεως in the Septuagint), as well as to the promised Messiah (Χριστός), his forefather and the greatest of Israel's kings (Δαυίδ), and the forefather of the whole Jewish people through whom the seed of promise would come (Αβραάμ). What follows are the divinely guided genealogy of Jesus Christ and an infancy narrative that contains the first four of ten explicit Old Testament fulfillment passages in Matthew.² Prominent in the introductory section of Matthew's plot (1:1–4:16) are various modes of divine revelation which unite to confirm the first line's claim that the key protagonist, Jesus, is the Christ. Apart from Old Testament prophecy, an angel appears and speaks in a dream (1:20–23; 2:13, 22); a star guides (2:2, 9–10); a new prophet proclaims (3:1–12); and the Spirit of God descends while a voice from heaven declares (3:16–17). Then in the first sixteen verses of chapter 4, the protagonist faces an initiatory test that closely parallels Israel's testing in the wilderness and is full of more Old Testament citations.

It is also worth noting that this first section of Matthew's plot, though full of divine revelation about the Christ, is full of misunderstanding too. Most mildly, Joseph's ponderings about sending Mary away are uninformed and must be corrected by revelation through a dream (1:20). More severely, Herod understands enough to know that Jesus is a

² Matt 1:22–23; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10. Nolland notes that some have seen three more fulfillment passages in 2:5–6; 26:54, 56. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 99n66.

potential king who will be born in Bethlehem, but not enough to accept his reign, and the Pharisees and Sadducees must have their misunderstanding challenged by John the Baptist. The wilderness temptation sees Satan attempting to obscure, unsuccessfully, the truth about who Jesus is and what he came to do. Bauer concludes that 1:1–4:16 “prepares the reader for all that follows” by showing the implied reader something of Jesus’s true identity and by foreshadowing the opposition he will face in the narrative, culminating in his crucifixion.³ Already the implied reader knows that God has revealed the truth about Jesus, and that despite his revelation not all understand.

The Sermon on the Mount begins the second part of Matthew’s plot, which will chronicle Jesus’s presentation of himself as the Messiah and Israel’s rejection of him (4:17–16:20), and serves as the first of Matthew’s five discourses. But of all the Matthean discourses, this one has nearly the least to say about divine revelation and its discernment.⁴ Rather the Sermon presents the authoritative teaching of Jesus, and the subsequent narrative (chaps. 8–9) presents his authoritative deeds.⁵ By the time the public presentation of Jesus is completed, the first hostile misunderstanding appears in the Pharisees who claim, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons” (9:34). That Jesus and his followers will be misunderstood becomes much clearer in the discourse that follows in chapter 10, wherein Jesus foretells persecution for those he sends out to proclaim the kingdom. The next narrative block (chaps. 11–12) begins with John the

³ David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Bible and Literature Series 15 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 84.

⁴ This is not to say the Sermon has nothing to say about revelation. The chapter on Matthew in Dan O. Via’s *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament* centers on 6:22–23, and Pennington shows that all of the discourses, including the Sermon, share the dual themes of revelation and separation. Dan O. Via, *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Jonathan T. Pennington, “Revelatory Epistemology in the Gospel According to Matthew in Dialogue with Francis Watson’s ‘Canonical Perspective,’” in *Writing the Gospels: A Dialogue with Francis Watson*, ed. Catherine Sider Hamilton and Joel Willitts (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 103–25.

⁵ Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel*, 130.

Baptist implying confusion about Jesus, and then with Jesus’s denunciation of the cities that reject him.

It is in this context that one of Matthew’s most significant statements on divine revelation and its discernment appears. The responses to Jesus and his message about the kingdom in this narrative block (chaps. 11–12) have entailed, for the first time, rejection—both by the crowds in chapter 11 and by the religious leadership in chapter 12.⁶ Yet right at the center of these rejections (11:25–30) Jesus explains fundamentally *why* he is experiencing rejection by the broader community but not by his disciples. As Frances Shaw points out, the phrase ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ (“at that time”) occurs only three times in Matthew, and two of those instances bracket this passage (11:25; 12:1), setting it apart as a unit.⁷ Shaw also notes that the participle used to describe Jesus’s speech, ἀποκριθεὶς, usually signifies a response; Matthew may therefore be making explicit the fact that this passage explains the rejection Jesus began to experience in chapter 11.⁸ If nothing else, the phrase “these things” (ταῦτα, v. 25), with its undefined referent, makes a look backward to the prior context inevitable. Here is Jesus’s explanation for why some can sense his validity and others cannot.

The picture of revelation that emerges in Matthew 11:25–30 is one that acknowledges both the givenness and the reception of divine revelation, but that leans heavily into its givenness.⁹ Jesus expresses gratitude to his Father and explicitly states

⁶ Bauer divides the narrative block into rejection by the Jewish crowds (chap. 11) and rejection by the Jewish leadership (chap. 12), the “two major sub-groups within Israel.” David R. Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God: An Introduction to Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 230, Kindle.

⁷ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 206.

⁸ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 206.

⁹ This is a picture that is true of Matthew overall. “Thus in 13.15; 15.10; 16.9; 17.12, with the understanding an element of willing is also posited. But this remains completely in the background because prominence is given to understanding as a gift; it is an act of God on a man, as obduracy is God’s judgment upon a man.” Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, trans. Perry Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 110.

that the Father both reveals (ἀποκαλύπτω) and conceals (κρύπτω) matters from and to people. Although “these things” are not defined, the prior context of the dual ways Jesus has been received—acceptance and rejection—make clear that the “things” are centered on Jesus himself. Since Jesus always conforms to the implied author’s own evaluative point of view (or vice versa!), we can infer that the implied author sees the discernment of revelation as an action whose success or failure returns ultimately to God himself. There is, in other words, a *givenness* to revelation—so much so that Shaw, when attempting to define “revelation” in the context of Matthew, includes in her definition the assertion that revelation “is always grounded in God’s initiative and is a gift of divine grace.”¹⁰ The Matthean Jesus does not begrudgingly or hesitantly ascribe initiative and action to God in the process of discerning revelation, but openly lauds the fact of divine givenness in verse 26: “yes, Father,” prays Jesus, “for such was your gracious will [εὐδοκία].” The chiasmic structure of verses 25 and 26 offered by Weren highlights this point:

A ²⁵ I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
 B because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent
 B’ and have revealed them to infants;
 A’ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.¹¹

The first and final stanza are united in implying God’s initiative in the discernment of revelation, while the second and third state that initiative directly.

Because this thesis focuses upon the disciples’ ability to discern revelation in 16:12 and 17:13, Jesus’s second claim in verse 25 (“you have...revealed them to little children”) is of greater interest than Jesus’s first claim (“you have hidden these things

¹⁰ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 18.

¹¹ W. J. C. Weren, “Secret Knowledge and Divine Revelation in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *Studies in Matthew’s Gospel: Literary Design, Intertextuality, and Social Setting*, Biblical Interpretation 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 54. Weren is following Luz here, as he does when he finds a similar structure in verse 27, but he differs from Luz in his analysis of vv. 28–30.

from the wise and understanding”).¹² The point of both claims in any case is to remove discernment from the realm of human ability (“the wise and understanding” are precisely those who *do not* understand) and to place it in the realm of divine enablement. The quality of “little children” primarily in view in this verse is their natural inability to understand; hence they are presented in contrast to the group whose sole characteristic is their ability to understand naturally. If little children *can* understand, their understanding must come from outside themselves, as Jesus in fact claims that it does.¹³ Matthew will utilize this same stereotype later in his work when the religious leadership are displeased that children cry out Jesus’s praise in the temple (Matt 21:14-17). There, Jesus will make God’s revelatory activity in the children explicit with a reference to the Septuagint’s reading of Psalm 8:2: “Out of the mouths of infants [νήπιοι, same as in 11:25] and nursing babies you have prepared praise.”¹⁴ That “nursing babies” are also compelled to praise proves how miraculous and absolute the divine activity must be understood to be; that they are compelled to speak about Jesus suggests once more that God’s revelation in Matthew has its focus on the person of Jesus.

The next part of this pericope provides the implied reader with another facet of how divine revelation is discerned, as Matthew’s Jesus shockingly expresses that

¹² However, God’s negative action of concealing these things from the wise and understanding does remind the implied reader that, positively, the correct discernment of revelation must come from God as well. “In Matthew, the religious leaders hold to a human point of view because they are incapable of receiving revelation from God. . . . This characterization is in keeping with a theme developed throughout Matthew, namely, that ‘understanding’ is something that must be given by God. The religious leaders do not understand because understanding is not given to them (cf. 11:25–27).” Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 60–61.

¹³ Weren states that the term νήπιοι alludes to “receptivity to God’s revelation and the ability to interpret the knowledge received correctly.” Weren, “Secret Knowledge,” 56. I am not disagreeing with Weren; Matthew is using the term with that connotation. But because children are stereotypically understood by the implied reader *not to understand*, the reader must account for the irony of children understanding, which is accomplished by attending to Jesus’s words about the divine givenness of the discernment of revelation.

¹⁴ Bauer points out the divine givenness at play in this later passage: “In response, the children cry out, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ as the crowds had done earlier. But, unlike the crowds, they do not add ‘the prophet,’ for insofar as they share the humility of Jesus (Mt 18:1-5; 19:13-15) these ‘babes’ have been given understanding from the Father (Mt 21:15-16; cf. Mt 11:25).” Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*, 261.

knowledge of the Father must come through the Son alone. “All things have been handed over to me by my Father,” Jesus says, “and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (v. 27). Jesus, the Son, must choose to reveal the Father to a person or that person cannot know the Father. Hence all true and personal knowledge of God is mediated by Jesus. He has been given “all things” by the Father, including the authority to make the Father known. In verses 25 and 26, the Father chooses to reveal; in verse 27, the Son chooses to reveal.

The Son’s role as revealer has sparked debate about the function of Matthew’s portrayal of the disciples as coming to understand in response to Jesus’s teachings. Is the implied author’s purpose to demonstrate the effectiveness of Jesus as a teacher, a successful revealer of heavenly truths? Redaction critics, noting how Matthew appears to portray the disciples’ ability to understand more positively than, say, Mark, have usually answered in the affirmative.¹⁵ But Jeannine K. Brown has challenged this view on the basis of a narrative-critical study of the characterization of the disciples in Matthew. She asserts that it is not Jesus’s effective teaching that is emphasized in Matthew’s Gospel, but rather the content of his teaching and his effective presence, since she believes that Matthew means to portray the disciples as essentially *misunderstanding* Jesus.¹⁶ Without settling the debate, this thesis must at least observe that a degree of understanding is *already* posited for the disciples in Matthew 11:25—the Father has revealed “these things” to “little children,” that is, he has opened the hearts of some to understand something of Jesus’s teachings. Brown’s negative view of the disciples may correct a

¹⁵ This tends to be the view of scholars outside of redactional criticism as well. Bauer, for example, in his literary analysis of Matthew’s structure, asserts that “in Matthew the disciples generally understand and are able to receive the revelation which Jesus communicates to them.” Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel*, 62. In a footnote he refers to a sampling of passages to support his claim, including 11:25–28; 13:11; and 16:17, all passages that feature prominently in this thesis.

¹⁶ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 122–23.

redactional overemphasis on their ability to understand, but she may also be overcorrecting the overemphasis. As Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 will again demonstrate, Matthew does portray Jesus as an effective teacher or revealer at several pivotal points, though not at all points and not to the extent that his disciples come to a thorough or complete understanding.

The final segment of this passage relates Jesus's invitation to the weary: "Come," he urges, "and learn [μαθάνω] from me" (vv. 28–29).¹⁷ The appeal is built upon the fact that Jesus is a revealer of God, stated just before. The call is clearly a call to discipleship, harkening back to Jesus's call of Peter and Andrew in Matthew 4:19 (both verses use the identical Δεῦτε, but with the different modifying prepositions ὀπίσω and πρὸς respectively). But what is most interesting about this closing segment is its emphasis on the *reception* of divine revelation, as opposed to its givenness. From what Jesus has already prayed, someone might conclude that revelation must be given apart from any human involvement; here that notion is nullified. The implied reader encounters three exhortations—one hortatory particle and two verbs in the imperative mood—that all urge human action leading to understanding.

The paradox produced by passages like this in Matthew and elsewhere in the New Testament, which juxtapose givenness and reception of revelation in ways difficult to reconcile, has been explained by Dan O. Via by means of the paradoxical title of his book, *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament*. He explains:

To speak of God's revelation *and* human reception is to suggest that God's self-disclosure is independent of—or something other than—human action and is the

¹⁷ Luz rightly points out that Jesus's command to "learn" from him refers mainly to the example of Jesus, "who himself embodies the will of the Father in his life." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch., 3 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001–2007), 174. Jesus's work of revealing the Father must be seen as a combination of word and deed, a notion already previewed in Matthew's first discourse-narrative block, which consisted of Jesus's authoritative teaching (chaps. 5–7) and his authoritative deeds (chaps. 8–9).

initiating factor in the communication between God and human beings. God's revealing action is prior in principle and elicits the human response. To speak of God's self-manifestation *as* human reception is to suggest that the human response is not merely passive and devoid of its own content but is a positive and constitutive factor in the actualization of revelation. Revelation does not occur apart from the specific ways in which it is received by human beings.¹⁸

Via's definition in tension captures the revelatory significance of Matthew 11:25–30: from the point of view of Matthew's implied author, the discernment of revelation requires primarily the initiative and activity of the Father and the Son (givenness), yet there remains a real human activity necessary for successful discernment (reception). God "chooses to reveal," and disciples must choose to come and learn.

Matthew 13:10-17

As noted before, chapter 12 continues a narrative block (chaps. 11–12) that describes Jesus's rejection. Chapter 11 chronicled his rejection by the Jewish crowds, chapter 12 his rejection by the religious leadership. Jesus's comments on revelation at the center of this block, in 11:25–30, serve in some ways as a preview of what he will say more fully about revelation in chapter 13. The importance of this chapter for discerning Matthew's view of discernment can hardly be overstated. Many scholars have noted the central place chapter 13 holds in the overall structure of Matthew and its message. The "Review of the Literature" above explained, for example, Combrink's conception of Matthean structure as a large chiasm with chapter 13 at the center. But it is not necessary to adopt Combrink's or anyone else's chiasmic structure in order to appreciate the pivotal role that Matthew 13 plays. Pennington has argued that thematically chapter 13 "serves as the organizing center for all five of the Discourses, with its content being almost exclusively" the dual notion of revelation and separation that runs as a common thread through all of the discourses.¹⁹ Elsewhere Pennington offers other ways in which chapter

¹⁸ Via, *The Revelation of God*, 1.

¹⁹ Pennington, "Revelatory Epistemology," 111.

13 draws attention to itself, including by “its placement at a crucial turning point in the overall narrative of the First Gospel.”²⁰ Although Kingsbury’s narrative schema for Matthew transitions at 4:17 and 16:21, he himself subdivides Jesus’s presentation of himself to Israel (4:17–16:20) into two parts: the presentation proper (4:17–11:1) and Israel’s rejection of Jesus in response (11:2–16:20).²¹ Note that the turning point for this subdivision is the beginning of the narrative which precedes the discourse in chapter 13 (i.e. chaps. 11–12), not far from Pennington’s “turning point” in chapter 12.²² Combrink identifies Kingsbury’s subsection (11:2–16:20) as a “larger turning area” in Matthew’s story, with chapter 13 at its heart.²³ For both thematic and structural reasons, the implied reader focuses upon Matthew 13 and, from it, derives the implied author’s view of discernment of revelation.

The first parable of chapter 13 is chiasmic, making use of a “sandwiching” technique more common to Mark’s Gospel.²⁴ Jesus tells the parable of the sower (A), explains why he employs parables in general (B), and then interprets the parable of the sower for his disciples (A’). His general explanation at the center of this section (vv. 10–17) contains the clearest data in this chapter on the implied author’s view of the

²⁰ Technically, Pennington offers several ways that Matthew 13 “serves as the lodestar for our understanding of Jesus’s parables in Matthew.” But Jesus’s parables are so closely tied to the dual theme of revelation and separation, which itself is at the heart of the discourses, that to be central to Jesus’s parabolic teaching is to be central to the Gospel itself. Jonathan T. Pennington, “Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables in the First Gospel,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 (2009), 14.

²¹ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 59.

²² Pennington finds the turning point of the book at Matt 12:1-14. “Then in chapter 12 we find the simmering opposition to Jesus boils over. Jesus has two knock-down, drag-out conflicts with the religious leaders of the day over the issue of Sabbath-observance. Beyond being merely a sharp theological dispute, this proves to be the turning point of the book.” Pennington, “Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables,” 14.

²³ H. J. Bernard Combrink, “The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983): 71

²⁴ See France’s brief description of “sandwiching” in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002), 18–20. The primary function of this technique, according to France, is to create tension and thus maintain the reader’s/listener’s interest.

discernment of revelation in Matthew. The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to “them” (i.e. the crowds) in parables. The beginning of Jesus’s answer almost exactly parallels his statement on revelation in Matthew 11:25. “To you,” he says, “it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” This double-sided activity—revealing and concealing—which was attributed to the Father in 11:25 is here offered without a defined subject, but surely the implied reader can infer that these are divine passives and that God is the one acting.

Matthew draws on the scriptural background of his implied reader to show that God’s revealing/concealing activity is not a novel idea. Jesus points back to Isaiah 6:9–10 and declares God’s present revelatory work to be a fulfillment of that prediction. Matthew’s appropriation of this text does emphasize the human reception of revelation, as had his softened negative statement in verse 11 that the secrets of the kingdom had “not been given” to outsiders rather than that they were “concealed” from them. The Hebrew text behind Matthew’s quotation in verses 14 and 15 offers the verbs as imperatives, as reflected in the ESV:

And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

The Septuagint carried over the infinitive absolute intensifiers for “keep on hearing” and “keep on seeing,” but changed the controlling verbs from commands to statements: “you will hear” (future indicative), “you will see” (future indicative), and “the heart of this people is dull” (aorist indicative). Matthew 13 quotes the Septuagint’s rendering such that what is emphasized is not Isaiah’s hardening ministry to Israel, but Israel’s hardness

which made his ministry unsuccessful.²⁵ The emphasis falls on Israel’s failure instead of God’s concealing activity. As Matthew 11:25 makes clear, the implied author would not disagree theologically with the Hebrew rendering of the Isaiah passage (God “conceals” as well as “reveals”), but by using the Septuagint’s rendering he highlights the human side of revelatory discernment.

Jesus immediately follows the Isaiah quotation with the declaration that the disciples’ eyes and ears are “blessed” (μακάριος) because they can see and hear (v. 16). It is hard not to see in this a preview of Jesus’s declaration, “Blessed [μακάριος] are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” (16:17) at the climax of 4:17–16:20.²⁶ There, as here, the blessing attends or entails God’s revealing work in the disciple. These are not cases wherein Jesus promises blessing for those who manage to understand, but rather statements of current fact for those who have been divinely enabled to understand.²⁷ Once again, therefore, the implied reader witnesses the concursion of divine givenness and human reception that is typical of the implied author’s point of view. Matthew 11:25–30 leans into divine givenness and 13:10–17 leans into human reception, yet in both instances both sides of discerning revelation are present.

The Narrow Context

If we borrow Frances Shaw’s language of “revelatory peaks” in Matthew and

²⁵ See Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 114. Her claim that Matthew changed Mark’s ἵνα to ὅτι in Matthew 13:14f is difficult to follow, since Mark does introduce the quotation with ἵνα but Matthew does not employ ὅτι. She must be read as referring to the ὅτι in verse 13.

²⁶ Matthew only uses μακάριος three times outside of its famous use in the beatitudes, and in each instance (11:6; 13:16; 16:17) it relates to discerning revelation. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 61.

²⁷ This forms part of Pennington’s larger argument that the macarisms of the beatitudes are declarations of the disciples’ current blessedness, not enticing promises of potential blessing. “Again, there is no promise of blessing to those who have open ears and clear eyes; the whole point of the explanation is that some are given this and others are not (cf. 11:25–30). Jesus is saying that the person who *does* see and hear and listen and obey is the one who can be described as *makarios*, as experiencing true and full life, because of that person’s alignment with Jesus’s teaching.” Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 56.

look down over the landscape of the text, three peaks rise the highest. The first and second, Matthew 11:25–30 and 13:10–17, were considered above. The third is a larger section and is both the highest peak and the climax of Matthew’s entire narrative. This peak is 16:5–17:13. The two verses that serve as the foci of this thesis conclude the pericopae that delimit this section and so wrap this peak on either side. But in order to understand how 16:12 and 17:13 are functioning in Matthew, we must first consider this final peak as a whole, or the narrow context of these two verses. In the next chapter we will consider the pericopae that contain 16:12 and 17:13, along with those verses, but in this chapter we will consider briefly the three pericopae which those sections bound: Peter’s successful discernment in his confession of Jesus as the Christ (16:13–20), Peter’s failure to discern further and Jesus’s correction (16:21–28), and the transfiguration (17:1–8).

Matthew 16:13–20

The focus of this pericope is not only the identity of Jesus, but also the way in which a disciple, Peter, comes to discern that identity. The disciples’ answer to Jesus’s first question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, reminds the implied reader of human misunderstandings about Jesus: Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist *redivivus* (14:2), and the people regarded him as a prophet (v. 5). The disciples on the other hand have been blessed with eyes that see (13:16), albeit limitedly, such that Peter can give a correct answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Certainly one function of Peter’s confession is to convey content about Jesus’s identity to the implied reader; Peter’s reply “is entirely the correct answer, since Jesus responds with a blessing,” writes Bauer, “and since this insight comes from divine revelation (Mt 16:17), it thus expresses God’s own point of view regarding Jesus (Mt 3:17).”²⁸ Yet Jesus’s opening

²⁸ Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God*, 243.

comment in verse 17 does more than affirm Peter’s answer—it picks up on the theme of discerning revelation that runs through Matthew’s Gospel and, in some sense, completes the theme.

Jesus states directly that Peter came to discern something of the Savior’s identity not by human aid, but rather by divine givenness. That Peter did not fully understand what Jesus’s messiahship meant is made clear by his misunderstanding and Jesus’s rebuke in the section that follows in verses 21–28, but the extent of Peter’s understanding is not as important for this thesis as the fact that he does indeed come to understand something by means of divine givenness. Otherwise Jesus’s declaration of blessing would be meaningless.

There is disagreement among scholars about whether or not the disciples develop in their understanding over the course of Matthew’s story. As stated in the “Review of the Literature,” many redaction critics, following Barth, consider Matthew’s portrayal of the disciples to be primarily positive, and his portrayal of their understanding to be progressive and developmental.²⁹ Yet the disagreement that exists on this point is not simply between redaction and narrative critics as groups, but also between narrative critics and themselves. For example, Richard A. Edwards’s narrative-critical study of the disciples argues that Peter’s confession “demonstrates how far the disciples have come.”³⁰ He concludes, “At this point [Matt 16:17] the T-CR [i.e. text-connoted reader, another term for implied reader] learns that Jesus’s attempt to mold his twelve followers

²⁹ This is not a universal consensus among redaction critics, and some see a more mixed presentation of the disciples. “Because the editor has made significant changes to Mark’s presentation of the disciples, some redaction critics have suggested an inconsistency in the gospel based primarily on the difference between traditions which the editor did not emend and those that were either emended or inserted. As a result, there are both positive and negative features of the disciples in Matthew’s edited story.” Richard A. Edwards, *Matthew’s Narrative Portrait of Disciples: How the Text-Connoted Reader Is Informed* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 1.

³⁰ Edwards, *Matthew’s Narrative Portrait*, 68.

has made significant progress”³¹ Another narrative critic, Jeannine K. Brown, in her study of the disciples concludes quite differently on this section, asserting that the disciples are portrayed as essentially “in an ideological conflict with Jesus,” understanding that he is the Messiah but misunderstanding what messiahship means.³² As I argued earlier, Brown seems to overcorrect redactive optimism with her bleak portrait of the disciples. She is correct that Peter misunderstands the nature of messiahship, yet Jesus considers Peter’s ability to understand at least that he is the Messiah a ground for exuberant declaration of blessedness. Peter has made some progress in understanding, and this progress is from above.

Matthew 16:21–28

The above paragraph notwithstanding, Brown is right to mute some of the optimism that scholars have felt about Matthew’s portrayal of the disciples’ understanding. When Jesus moves beyond his bare messiahship to an explanation of what messiahship entails, Peter does shift from ideological harmony to ideological conflict with Jesus. Because of Peter’s misunderstanding, he proves himself not only a “rock” (πέτρα, v. 18) but a “stumbling stone” (σκάνδαλον, v. 23), even an agent of Satan himself!³³ Peter’s view of messiahship excludes the suffering that Jesus, and hence God, considers essential to it; consequently, Jesus must correct Peter’s view of the Messiah’s suffering (v. 23) and of the suffering of his disciples (vv. 24–28).

Most worth noting for the purpose of this thesis is the moral responsibility assumed by the implied author in regard to Peter. Verse 23 cannot be construed as

³¹ Edwards, *Matthew’s Narrative Portrait*, 69.

³² Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 91.

³³ There may or may not be an intentional word play at this point. “Secondly, while Peter is named a rock in 16:18, in 16:23 he is a σκάνδαλον. One wonders whether, as Schweizer, *Matthew*, p. 345, thinks, there is intended a wordplay on the πέτραν σκανδάλου or *šūr mikšól* of Isa 8:14 (cf. Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:8).” W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 2:664.

anything less than a strong rebuke, and Peter's error is not mere ignorance but an active setting of the mind (φρονέω) on the things of man. When Peter succeeds in understanding, the divine givenness of revelation is emphasized; when he fails, the human reception comes to the surface. This is explainable by the fact that, to the implied author, God cannot fail in imparting understanding, but the recipients of that understanding can fail to receive it.

Matthew 17:1–8

The final piece of the narrow context of Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 is the transfiguration. If there is a revelatory peak in Matthew that towers above the rest, it is this one.³⁴ Matthew's theme of the fulfillment of Old Testament revelation finds its own fulfillment in the presence of Moses and Elijah; Christological revelation finds its apex in the visible glory of Jesus in his transfigured state; and the Father's revelation about the Son and through the Son climaxes in the unambiguous heavenly declaration, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (v. 5). As before, the implied author weaves together examples of successful and unsuccessful discernment of revelation in the disciples. Peter failed to understand quite remarkably in 16:21–28, but was chosen nonetheless to behold Jesus's greatest act of self-revelation in 17:1–8.³⁵ And within this passage itself, Peter speaks when he should listen, and yet he is still granted to hear the heavenly voice. Beyond these observations, Matthew's description of the transfiguration powerfully reinforces observations already made in this thesis, but adds

³⁴ Shaw, drawing on Luz, calls the transfiguration a peak in regard to Christological revelation; she also considers it a peak of ecclesiological revelation in Matthew. Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation*, 76.

³⁵ Davies and Allison beautifully describe this revelatory event on the heels of Peter's revelatory failure: "Finally, Peter must also, again like David and so many others, be intended to stand as a symbol of God's ever-ready willingness to bestow forgiveness on the imperfect. For as soon as Peter has been quickly dismissed for words better left unsaid, Jesus selects him, along with two others, to be witnesses of the transfiguration. Thus Peter, so far from being punished for his misguided thoughts, is immediately granted a glimpse of the glorified Christ. Is the reader not expected to see in this a triumph of grace?" Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:665–66.

little else that is new.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to draw the contours of how the implied author of Matthew portrays discernment of revelation among disciples in his Gospel, leading up to Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. To that end, I have provided both a broad context (focused on 11:25–30 and 13:10–17) and a narrow context (16:13–17:8) to these verses. The interplay of divine givenness and human reception has featured prominently in the author's portrayal, and the revelatory significance of the section containing the formula of this thesis has been demonstrated. All that remains is to consider Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 themselves in the light of this context, and to demonstrate what the implied author wishes to convey to the implied reader by means of them.

CHAPTER 3

TEXT

The present chapter is the heart of this thesis.¹ Above, I have shown the oversight of Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 in scholarly works, established their importance in theme and placement, analyzed the Matthean author's view of discernment of revelation prior to these verses, and given the necessary context for understanding them. Here, I will consider the verses themselves in their respective pericopae, and especially the formula that they share: τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι. My thesis is that the implied author of Matthew uses this formula to present to his implied reader examples of the successful discernment of disciples, which occurs at the concursion of divine givenness and human reception. To prove the thesis, I will consider first the portrayal of the disciples by means of the formula in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13, and then I will assert a specific function for that portrayal.²

Portrayal

Matthew 16:12

The portrayal of the Matthean disciples in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 is unknowable apart from the pericopae in which they are found. Therefore, this thesis will now look to Matthew 16:5–12 in order to understand Matthew 16:12 and its formula. It

¹ The less frequent footnotes in this chapter, compared to previous chapters, is owing to the scarcity of scholarly commentary on Matthew 16:12 and 17:13, as I pointed out in the “Review of the Literature.”

² For more on the relationship between portrayal and function, see Jeannine K. Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples*, Academia Biblica 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 33–34.

must be noted at the outset, by way of reminder, that this pericope is still in the narrative block that immediately follows the pivotal chapter 13, and is still in the central part of Matthew's plotline (4:17–16:20) which chronicles Jesus's presentation to Israel as her Messiah and her rejection of him. The rejection itself began in earnest in chapters 11–12, and chapter 13 served as an explanation for that rejection by separating out the masses who are not given understanding by God from the disciples who are (13:10–17). In the narrative following chapter 13, Jesus continues to deal with religious leaders who hate him (15:1–14; 16:1–4) and disciples who only imperfectly understand him (14:15–18, 26, 30–31; 15:15, 33), but the two events which most stand out in this section are Jesus's two miraculous feedings (14:13–21; 15:32–39). The other miracles of Jesus in chapters 14–15 are paralleled earlier in Matthew's narrative by similar events—healings (8:1–4, 5–13, 14–17; 9:1–8, 18–26, 27–31, 32–34; 12:9–14, 22–24), exorcisms (8:14–17, 28–34; 9:32–34; 12:22–24), and control over the sea (8:23–27). But the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand are shockingly new, paralleled only by each other. And in each instance, the implied author records an interaction between Jesus and his disciples that shows, albeit mildly, their inability to understand Jesus's power (14:17; 15:33).

The prominence of these acts, their repetition, and the way the implied author portrays Jesus as instructing the disciples in them, all help to explain the severity with which Jesus rebukes his disciples for their misunderstanding in 16:5–12. Jesus has also explained so many parables to his disciples (13:19–23, 36–43; 15:15–20) that, by now, he expects they should be able to understand one without his explanation. The human side of discerning revelation is in full view in this pericope as Jesus once more reproves his disciples for their littleness of faith (16:8) and their littleness of comprehension (v. 11).³

³ Gerhard Barth argues that Matthew, unlike Mark, has removed the intellectual component of πίστις and transferred it instead to σύνημι, such that “faith” in Matthew is virtually the same as “willing” (θέλω) and not “understanding.” Gerhard Barth, “Matthew's Understanding of the Law,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, trans. Perry Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 114–15. Dan O. Via disagrees: “Matthew makes no programmatic distinction between [‘faith’ and ‘understanding’]. Dan O. Via, *The Revelation of God and/as Human*

No matter what one thinks about how positively or negatively Matthew portrays the disciples overall in regard to their understanding, no one can deny that in 16:5–12 the disciples *do* come to understand through Jesus. Important to this pericope and the next that we will consider is the fact that Jesus does not tell his disciples directly what he means, but instead leads them toward the correct meaning. The disciples' confusion began with Jesus's command, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees," in verse 6. At the end of his reproof, Jesus merely repeats himself: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (v. 11). His guidance is purely negative, communicating that the disciples' interpretation of his parable is incorrect. This leaves a gap between Jesus's instruction and the disciples' correct understanding which they themselves must and do bridge. However, given the implied author's previous comments on the divine givenness of true understanding (esp. at 11:25–30 and 13:10–17) and, perhaps more importantly, his approaching comment about the source of Peter's understanding in verse 17, the implied reader will not assume the absence of divine aid between verses 11 and 12. Edwards, in writing about 16:12 and the pericopae that follow, asserts that the implied reader is informed

that the disciples cannot, no matter how hard they work, arrive at the goal without the assistance of the Father. As Jesus is portrayed as the obedient son, the disciples are portrayed as having reached a significant height, not through their own insight or strength, but through openness to the influence of the Father.⁴

This is explicit in the episode of Peter's confession, but it is implied at 16:12. Thus Jesus's rebuke and his leading questions emphasize the human-reception side of revelation, but the formula τότε συνῆκαν ὅτι in its context implies the divine givenness of it. Matthew portrays the disciples as able to come to understanding, but in a way that

Reception in the New Testament (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 139. From a narrative-critical point of view, it is difficult to draw a strong distinction between "faith" and "understanding," as their near synonymous use in this pericope also demonstrates.

⁴ Richard A. Edwards, *Matthew's Narrative Portrait of Disciples: How the Text-Connotted Reader Is Informed* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 77.

requires divine aid.

Jeannine K. Brown's largely negative portrait of the Matthean disciples should be noted here. Whereas many have seen statements like that in Matthew 16:12 as portraying the disciples as able to understand, Brown chooses instead to emphasize the ways in which even this statement indicates misunderstanding. First, she notes that direct characterization like that found in 16:12 and 17:13 is not as conclusive as indirect characterization, and that in her view the indirect characterization of the disciples in regard to understanding is negative.⁵ Secondly, she points to the limited scope of what the disciples understand in 16:12 and 17:13. In the former case they come to understand that by "leaven" Jesus means teaching; in the latter case, they discern that by "Elijah" he means John the Baptist.⁶ Finally, she observes that the very fact they must be cajoled into understanding by Jesus shows once more how much they misunderstand.⁷ She concludes that Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 "do not provide adequate evidence that the Matthean disciples possess understanding as a general characteristic."⁸

Yet Brown's conclusions feel biased. The implied author does not seem to scrutinize instances of the disciples understanding as thoroughly as Brown does. When Peter comes to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus does not reply by cursing him for not yet understanding all that messiahship entails; rather, he declares him blessed to have received this revelation from the Father. And while Brown's comments about the limitations of the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 are technically true, this does not prove that the implied author intended an overall negative portrayal for the disciples at these points. They do not understand all, but they do understand. Furthermore, it is not clear that

⁵ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 107.

⁶ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 107n45.

⁷ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 109n54.

⁸ Brown, *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*, 107n45.

indirect characterization should bear more weight than direct characterization. There is certainly more indirect than direct characterization of the disciples in Matthew’s Gospel, but Powell is right to call indirect characterization “less precise” than direct, even if it is “more interesting.”⁹

I conclude then that the implied author of Matthew 16:12 portrays the disciples there as coming to true understanding through the concursion of human reception and divine givenness. Jesus’s appeals in the verses prior make clear that the disciples must receive understanding by their own applied effort. But the context of the verse—both broad and narrow—ensures that the implied reader also sees in the τότε of this formula an act of divine givenness. By means of the formula at 16:12, the author portrays the disciples as moving from ignorance to understanding as these two axes meet.

Matthew 17:13

The formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι appears a second time at Matthew 17:13, again at the end of a discussion between Jesus and his disciples. What draws attention to this verse and its pericope is the clear evidence of repetition. A comparison of 16:5–12 and 17:9–13 reveals a parallel pattern. Both begin with the conjunctive καί and a participle that sets the scene for the pericope. In the former case, the disciples come (ἐλθόντες, 16:5) to the other side of the Sea of Galilee; in the latter, Jesus and the disciples are descending the Mount of Transfiguration (καταβαινόντων, 17:9; a genitive absolute). In both cases, Jesus is the first to speak (16:6; 17:9) and the disciples then follow with a statement or question revealing their incorrect or limited understanding (16:7; 17:10). Jesus then speaks again in a way that does not directly resolve their misunderstanding, but rather points them in the right direction (16:8–11; 17:11–12). Finally, the formula appears, τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι, demonstrating that the

⁹ Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 52.

disciples were able to bridge the gap between Jesus’s partial correction or explanation and the full realization of the truth.

Table 1. Comparison of Matthew 16:5–12 and 17:9–13

Feature	Matthew 16:5–12	Matthew 17:9–13
(1) Conjunction	Καὶ	Καὶ
(2) Scene-setting participle	ἐλθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ εἰς τὸ πέραν	καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους
(3) Jesus’s initiating speech	ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς	ἐνετείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων
(4) Disciples’ response	οἱ δὲ διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λέγοντες ὅτι	καὶ ἐπηρώτησαν αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ λέγοντες
(5) Jesus’s corrective speech	γνοὺς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν	ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν
(6) Disciples’ understanding	τότε συνῆκαν ὅτι	τότε συνῆκαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ὅτι

The differences that do exist between these pericopae are minor: Jesus’s initiating speech as statement and as command; the disciples’ response as private musing and as clarifying question; and Jesus’s corrective speech as strongly critical and as accommodating. But these differences pail before the nearly identical usage of metaphorical language which forms the basis of both passages. In each case, what the disciples fail at first to understand is Jesus’s non-literal use of a word: “leaven” in the first instance and “Elijah” in the second.¹⁰ And in both cases, the concluding formula portrays the disciples grasping the referent of the non-literal language.

What is the significance of this structural and thematic parallelism for Matthew’s portrayal of the disciples? Chiefly, it demonstrates that the implied author does not intend

¹⁰ I am using “non-literal” in the colloquial sense of “not according to the literary genre of narrative,” that is, “metaphorical.”

Matthew 16:12 and 17:13 as unimportant sidebars in his characterization of the disciples. Shaw's comments on "intensification" through the "clustering of revelatory events" apply here:

This [the disciples falling down and Jesus's touching them in 17:6–7, immediately after the transfiguration] is a second revelatory encounter, and is similar in style and content to the episode of Peter walking on the water (14.28–31), again one revelatory encounter set in the context of another. This intensification is also shown in the narrative sequence whereby the revelation at Caesarea Philippi is immediately followed by revelation at the transfiguration. This clustering of revelatory events is a feature both of Matthew's gospel (here, and especially at the beginning and end), and is also found in scriptural tradition. Its effect is to highlight the significance of revelation at critical moments in divine history.¹¹

If there is an intensification between two revelatory events in a single pericope (the transfiguration proper, 17:1–5; and Jesus's reassurance afterward, vv. 6–7) and between two revelatory events in immediately succeeding pericopae (the happenings at Caesarea Philippi, 16:13–28; and the transfiguration, 17:1–7), then this intensification should be raised one level higher to include the entire section of 16:5–17:13, with one revelatory bookend (16:5–12) being intensified in its counterpart (17:9–13). Figure 1 below visualizes the layers of intensification happening in 16:5–17:13. While 16:5–12 and 17:9–13 are unique in that they are not immediately successive, their structural and thematic parallelism leads the implied reader to read one in light of the other, resulting in a real, if somewhat dampened, intensification from the start of this section to its end.

The important point is that the event of discerning revelation, captured in the formula that concludes the bookends, is closely tied to the revelation that the formula "sandwiches" and, just like those high points of revelation, is important for the characterization of the disciples. The blessing that Jesus declares over Peter in 16:17 for his God-given ability to understand should not be divorced from the formula, "Then they understood," which surrounds it. One informs the implied reader about the other. If the

¹¹ Frances Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, Religions and Discourse 30 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 75.

Father revealed the messiahship of Jesus to Peter at the center of this revelatory cluster, the implied reader should glean from this that the Father also revealed the meaning of Jesus’s metaphorical statements to Jesus on the outside of the cluster. And if Peter can fail to understand the nature of Jesus’s messiahship because of the human-reception side of discernment, so can he fail at first to discern Jesus’s metaphorical statements.

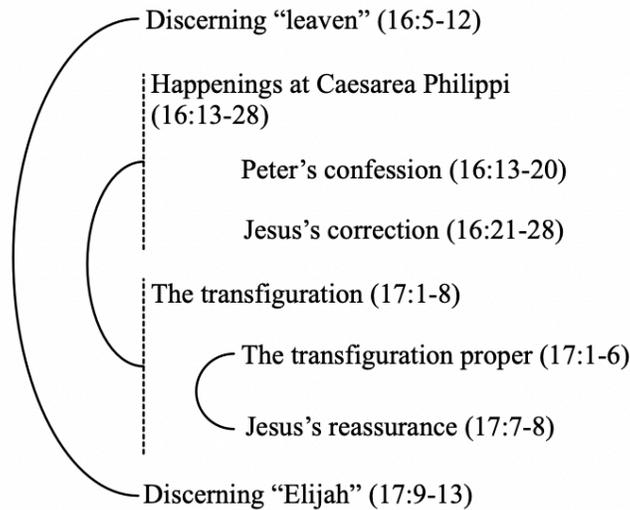


Figure 1. Intensification between revelatory events in Matthew 16:5–17:13¹²

If the intensifying relationships in 16:5–17:13 do not adequately prove the importance of 16:12 and 17:13 for the implied author, one argument remains in their defense, namely, their location in Matthew’s plotline. Kingsbury’s well-known outline of Matthew is built around the twice-occurring formula *Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς*.¹³ The first appearance of this phrase concludes the introduction of Matthew at 4:17, beginning

¹² Although Shaw does not mention it, one could posit an intensifying relationship between “Peter’s confession” and “Jesus’ correction” on this figure. Jesus’ correction is quite revelatory, since he is revealing the true nature of messiahship over against the disciples’ more limited understanding of it. On the other hand, to argue an intensification from the high point of Peter’s confession to Jesus’s subsequent appeal for secrecy and his negating comments feels slightly strained.

¹³ See “Review of the Literature: Structural Works” in chap. 1 of this thesis.

the body of the work in which Jesus is presented to Israel as the Messiah and then rejected. The next transition, from this body to the end of the work containing the passion and resurrection, occurs at 16:21. In this way of looking at Matthew's structure, Peter's confession (16:13–20) forms the culmination of the body of Matthew's Gospel, wherein Peter, in contrast to the Jewish people as a whole and "as spokesman for the disciples, confesses Jesus aright to be the Son of God and so reveals that the disciples' evaluative point of view concerning Jesus's identity is in alignment with that of God."¹⁴

Surprisingly, the formula shared by 16:12 and 17:13 sits on both sides of this turning point in Matthew's story. The implied author portrays the disciples as coming to understand through Jesus's teachings both before Peter's confession of the Messiah and after the disciples have proven they misunderstand his messiahship. To suggest that the statement "Then they understood" should be read as minimally important for the characterization of the disciples in Matthew misses its placement at such an important revelatory cluster in such an important section of the plot.

This thesis concludes, therefore, that the portrayal of the disciples in the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 is positive and is significant for the overall characterization of the disciples in Matthew. The implied author communicates—very directly and clearly—that the disciples can understand some mysteries of the kingdom with Jesus's help. The implied reader is informed by context that the successful discernment of the disciples involves both their own effort (reception) and a divine act (givenness). Matthew has conveyed this concursivity of discerning revelation to the reader in the broad context leading up to this formula, especially at 11:25–30 and 13:10–17, but he has also conveyed it quite clearly in the narrow context of 16:5–17:13.

¹⁴ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 75.

Function

All that remains in this thesis is to argue for the function of the formula at Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. The implied author has portrayed the disciples in a particular way through this formula, especially as concerns their discernment of revelation, but what does he intend to accomplish by that portrayal? Narrative criticism as a general rule avoids thoroughgoing speculations about the actual author or audience, bracketing out historical questions in order to focus on the text and the textual world of the Gospels.¹⁵ It is not as preoccupied with the author and reader as with the *implied* author and the *implied* reader within the text.¹⁶ And yet one of the strengths of narrative criticism is its focus on how the implied reader is affected by the text, especially by means of the implied author's evaluative or ideological point of view. Hence at the very least, the function of any given text can be understood to be the implied author's attempt to persuade the implied reader to share his or her evaluative point of view.¹⁷ In the Gospels, the implied author's evaluative point of view is identical with God's evaluative point of view, which itself is the same as Jesus's point of view.¹⁸ Furthermore, Matthew as a narrator is reliable and shows his own direct narration to be in line with God's point of view.¹⁹

¹⁵ Powell says it well, with the appropriate caveats: “[Narrative critics] bracket out questions of historicity in order to concentrate on the nature of the text as literature. They do not deny that biblical narratives may also serve a referential function or that it may be rewarding to study them in that regard as well.” Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 8.

¹⁶ For definitions of these terms, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 147–51. For definitions of these terms as they are used by narrative critics of the New Testament, see Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 5–6 (implied author), 15 (implied reader).

¹⁷ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 40.

¹⁸ Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Figure of Jesus in Matthew’s Story: A Literary-Critical Probe,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21 (1984): 4–7.

¹⁹ One way Matthew aligns his point of view as narrator with God’s is by his use of Old Testament quotations. “For its part, the ‘speech’ of Matthew or a character is a good indicator of the evaluative point of view that he or a character espouses. For example, the formula-quotations are all spoken by Matthew himself, and a key component in each is the citation of OT scripture. Because OT scripture counts as the word of God, the result of the fact that the formula quotations make up an important part of

These observations allow us to get at the function of the implied author's phrase τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι. What evaluative point of view does Matthew urge the implied reader to adopt? First and most simply, the author uses the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 to inform and persuade the reader of the meaning of Jesus's enigmatic words just beforehand. What follows ὅτι in each case defines authoritatively for the reader what Jesus meant by his metaphors: "teaching" for "leaven," and "John the Baptist" for "Elijah." The verb συνίημι in the indicative mood, in direct narration, in response to Jesus's correction, and without caveat reveals to the reader that what the disciples understood is in keeping with God's point of view and therefore is true.

But this thesis wants to put emphasis on a second function of the formula, and one which applies to the overall characterization of the Matthean disciples. If I am correct in arguing above that the implied author portrays the disciples in 16:12 and 17:13 as able to understand by the concursion of human reception and divine givenness, and if I am correct in seeing these verses as significant for the overall characterization of the disciples in Matthew, then a central function of the formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι is to persuade the implied reader that the human discernment of divine revelation is possible by just these same means.

Here we must make a small jump with the implied author from what he suggests about the narrative character of the disciples to a more generalized principle that he wants the implied reader to adopt about all disciples. Scholars term this jump "contemporization." Bauer describes it in this way:

The implied reader recognizes that Matthew intends that some elements of the story of Jesus and the original disciples do not reflect the situation of the implied reader but are rather to be understood as belonging to the historical past with a view that the implied reader will derive insight by attending specifically to their past-

Matthew's speech is that he thus becomes, as narrator, an exponent of God's evaluative point of view in assessing the salvation-historical significance of various events in the life of Jesus." Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 35.

historical character. This concern for pastness we might call Matthew's "historicization." Yet the implied reader also recognizes that Matthew has so presented certain features of his story as to connect directly with the experience of the implied reader who stands on this side of Matthew 28:20. This contemporary identification we might call Matthew's "contemporization."²⁰

Here we are dangerously close to the edge of narrative criticism and the beginning of historical criticism. And yet it is still the implied reader's understanding that is in focus, not the actual readers' historical circumstance. Perhaps a safer narrative-critical way to describe "contemporization" is through the category of "symbolic world" used by Shaw, drawing on Syreeni. In this case, we consider the implied author's general or symbolic view of discipleship as derived from the text.

Does the implied author at 16:12 and 17:13 attempt to persuade the implied reader not just about the disciples in the text, but about discipleship generally? The answer is most likely yes. Matthew has demonstrated on more than one occasion that disciples can discern revelation through the concursion of human reception and divine givenness. Jesus made this argument on behalf of "little children" at 11:25, and then of the disciples explicitly at 13:10–17. This theme reaches its high point at Peter's confession, around which sits the formula of Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. If any of those other explanations of Jesus, who shares God's evaluative point of view, can be taken to inform the reader about Matthew's overall conception of discipleship, then the statement of the narrator at 16:12 and 17:13 should be taken similarly. After all, the narrator has aligned himself with God's point of view, so that his words are not unlike Jesus's own.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples in such a way that they, not alone but with the assistance of divine activity, move from not understanding to understanding truths about Jesus and his program. They do not come to understand Jesus

²⁰ David R. Bauer, *The Gospel of the Son of God: An Introduction to Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 103, Kindle. Bauer is drawing on Ulrich Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 115–16; and David B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study of the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*, Library of New Testament Studies, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplemental Series 42 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

and his program entirely, but that which they do understand of him and of it is true. What we have therefore in Matthew 16:5–12 and 17:9–13 are two parallel Matthean worlds in miniature. Jesus teaches, the disciples misunderstand, Jesus corrects, and “then they understood.” This is the pattern of discerning revelation that arcs across the entire text. Although the formula “Then they understood” does not itself make explicit the concursion of divine givenness and human reception, its broad and narrow contexts make this dynamic obvious to the implied reader. When the implied reader encounters τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι, what he finds therefore is the living example of the pattern of disciples coming to discern revelation that he has heard described by Jesus throughout Matthew. And that pattern is the joining together of human disciples working to understand and the Father working to reveal, all by means of the teachings of Jesus. When the formula “then they understood” occurs, the implied reader witnesses the concursion of divine givenness and human reception that is the model for how disciples come to understand spiritual realities.

Conclusion

In many ways, this thesis is frontloaded—most of its argumentation leads up to and surrounds the formula in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. But this is because if one accepts the argument from context, then the portrayal and function of the formula in view follows rather naturally, excepting a consideration of the relationship between portrayal and function. This is also due to the structural emphasis of narrative criticism. I have tried to show that the overall structure of Matthew’s Gospel, together with the way it develops the theme of discerning revelation, leads to the conclusion that the formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι exemplifies positively for the reader how disciples in general come to understand. The connection of the formula thematically to 11:25–30, 13:10–17, and Jesus’s reply to Peter at 16:17 demonstrate that it is a positive example of discerning revelation; its pivotal location in the structure of Matthew demonstrates that it is an

important one.

This argument stands in contrast to more negative views of the Matthean disciples in relation to their developing understanding, such as that of Jeannine K. Brown in her book *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective*. Brown is right to note the limitations of what the disciples come to understand at 16:12 and 17:13, but she too much minimizes the fact that they do indeed come to understand something. If the implied author wishes the formula to be a positive example of understanding, then the formula should be seen first as a positive example, and only then as a limited one. Furthermore, this my thesis pushes back against the very slight treatment that these verses have received in scholarly works. Although they are only two verses, they occur at a vital point in Matthew's plot and address a central part of Matthew's message. Their structural connection with Peter's confession and the transfiguration also gives them a greater prominence than their brevity suggests. Matthew portrays the disciples as able to understand Jesus when their strivings are enabled by God, and the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 provides one of the best enacted examples of this fact.

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ABSTRACT

THEN THEY UNDERSTOOD: A NARRATIVE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 16:12 AND 17:13

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This thesis is a narrative-critical analysis of the formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι as it appears in Matthew 16:12 and 17:13. This formula is rarely discussed in scholarly works, and yet it occurs at a pivotal part of Matthew's structure and contributes to one of Matthew's major themes, the discernment of revelation. In order to discover the function of the formula in view, this thesis considers its context—both broadly (all of Matthew prior, but especially 11:25–30 and 13:10–17) and narrowly (16:5–17:13). Special emphasis is given to structural considerations. Then, the portrayal of the disciples by means of the formula at 16:12 and 17:13 is discussed, followed by the function of the formula. This thesis argues that the formula τότε συνῆκαν (οἱ μαθηταὶ) ὅτι functions to positively portray how a disciple discerns revelation, namely, through the concursion of human reception and divine givenness.

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