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**“The Use of David’s Story in Matthew 12:1-8:  
Appraisal of Jesus’ Hermeneutics.”**

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**Abstract**

Scholars identify Jesus’ hermeneutical methodology of David’s example in Matthew 12:3-4 as (a) rabbinic hermeneutics and (b) typological hermeneutics. In all, Jesus is connected with David. Contemporary New Testament scholars understand Matthean Jesus’s use of the story of David as (1) Jesus has authority like David; (2) Jesus presents himself as the Messiah and an antitype of David; or (3) Jesus sees himself as greater than David and/or the Temple.

Thus, scholars compare Jesus with David and postulate that Jesus has authority to ignore the law. Hence, Matthew 12:3-4 has been interpreted through David-Jesus messianic lenses. However, a critical look at the text in its setting questions these long-held views. A critical review of related literature has presented two main gaps that this study seeks to address: (1) comparing David with Jesus makes the comparison awkward; (2) The David-typology approach makes an argument to justify the conduct of Jesus' disciples, thereby advancing a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry, without identifying the setting that allows Christological reading of the text. The burden of this research is to explore Jesus' use David's example in Matt 12:3-4 in the setting of Jesus and the Evangelist while investigating its hermeneutics.

## Keywords

David, Jesus' disciples, rabbinic hermeneutics, typological hermeneutics.

## Introduction

The rationale for Jesus' use of David's story in defence of the action of the disciples has attracted a myriad of attention. For example, Eugene Boring thinks that Matt 12:3-4 presents Jesus as an authority.<sup>1</sup> Like David, Jesus overrules the Sabbath on the basis of the necessity of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg further stresses the authority of Jesus as the one who "can transcend the law and make permissible for his disciples what once was forbidden".<sup>3</sup> However, David Garland opines that in Matt 12:3-4 Jesus is shown as the messiah and antitype of David who ignored the law in an emergency situation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, scholars compare Jesus with David and that Jesus has authority to ignore the law. Hence, Matthew 12:3-4 has been interpreted through David-Jesus messianic lenses.<sup>5</sup> However, a

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene M. Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 8:278.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 197.

<sup>4</sup>David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 136.

<sup>5</sup>John Appiah, "A Critical Study of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:1-8," (PhD diss., Philippine Christian University, Manila, Philippines, 2017), 10-18; John Appiah and Daniel Berchie, *A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew*

critical look at the text in its setting questions or challenges this general understanding or long-held views.<sup>6</sup> A critical review of related literature has presented two main gaps that this study seeks to address: (1) scholars explain Jesus' use of the example of David as a rabbinic hermeneutics or typological hermeneutics. Generally, Jesus is seen as the antitype of David. This assumption may explain messianic reading of Jesus' use of David's story in Matt 12:1-8. A sound typological hermeneutics may focus on the essential correspondences between the person, event or the thing compared. It is suggestive, then, that Jesus' action and David's conduct should be compared. However, both stories differ since Jesus was not hungry and did nothing unlawful but David was and did. Therefore, comparing David with Jesus makes the comparison awkward. Also, it has been pointed out that Matt 12:3-4 compares the conduct of David and those with him with the conduct of Jesus' disciples.<sup>7</sup> While scholars compare David (with his companions) and Jesus (with his disciples), the passage seems to present a different picture.<sup>8</sup> (2) The David-typology approach makes an argument to justify the conduct of Jesus' disciples, thereby advancing a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry. None of the postulation of scholars, however, adequately explains why Jesus used the example of David in answering the Pharisaic query.<sup>9</sup> Because of the inadequacies of typological hermeneutics, this study argues that Jesus' use of David's story in Matt 12:3-4 is best understood through a nuanced analysis of its literary and theological context, rather than as a straightforward typological comparison.

In the synoptic gospel analysis, the intention is to seek the place; premium on the theological interest of the gospel writer. A consideration of Jesus' use of David's story in the synoptic gospels

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12:3-4 in Contemporary Scholarly Debate, *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)*, 9.7(2023), 281-287.

<sup>6</sup>Appiah, "A Critical Study of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:1-8," 22-23; Appiah and Berchie, "A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4," 281-287.

<sup>7</sup>John P. Meier compares David and his companions with the disciples of Jesus [John P. Meier, *Matthew*, New Testament Message: A Biblical-Theological Commentary (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 129].

<sup>8</sup>Appiah, "A Critical Study of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:1-8," 17-18; Appiah and Berchie, "A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4," 281-287.

<sup>9</sup>Appiah, "A Critical Study of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:1-8," 17-18; Appiah and Berchie, "A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4," 281-287

shows both significant verbal and conceptual differences.<sup>10</sup> This is due to the theological interest of each, in view of the overall purpose of writing. Apart from assessing Jesus' intent for using David's story, one may need to appreciate why Matthew included this Sabbath conflict episode in its present place and the overarching purpose of writing.<sup>11</sup> This article investigates the rationale for the use of David's story in defence of the disciples eating of the heads of grain in Matthew 12:3-4.

In synoptic Gospel studies, the setting of the sayings and the deeds of Jesus is key to understanding any text.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have identified three settings for this purpose: First, the actual life setting of Jesus' ministry. This setting revolved around the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in the first third of the 1st century CE.<sup>13</sup> Second, the church's situational needs shaped the words and the deeds of Jesus prior to the documentation of the Gospels. This setting centred on the apostolic preaching about Jesus' material during the second third of the 1st century CE.<sup>14</sup> Third, the setting during which the writings of the Gospels took place. This setting centred on the written Gospels during the last third of the 1st century CE.<sup>15</sup>

The attempt to identify how the needs of the church affected the oral transmission of the words and deeds of Jesus has been educated conjecturing. As such, NT scholarship concentrates on establishing "the actual events in the lifetime of Jesus" and "the setting at the time of writing of the Gospels".<sup>16</sup> In the view of Warren, both the settings of Jesus and the Evangelist contribute to understanding the text.<sup>17</sup> Matthew 12:3-4 may be more appreciable

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<sup>10</sup>William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew 8-18*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 308, 313; Scott F. Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," *Interpretation* 64, no. 4 (2010), 371; David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, UK: Athlone, 1956), 71; Dan M. Cohn-Sherbok, "An Analysis of Jesus's Arguments Concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979): 31-41; Meier, *Matthew*, 129.

<sup>11</sup>Appiah, "A Critical Study of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:1-8," 17-18; Appiah and Berchie, "A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4," 281-287.

<sup>12</sup>William F. Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narrative: The Gospels and Acts." In *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*. 2nd ed. ed. Bruce Corley, Steve W. Lemke, and Grant I. Lovejoy (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2002), 319-320.

<sup>13</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 107; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

<sup>14</sup>Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 107, 108; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

<sup>15</sup>Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 109; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

<sup>16</sup>Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

<sup>17</sup>Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 320.

in these two settings as found in the final text of the Gospel of Matthew. This may help to better understand the hermeneutical appraisal of Jesus' use of David's story in Matthew 12:3-4, namely, (1) the audience of Jesus and (2) the audience of Matthew.

What is clear from this brief overview of scholars' understanding on Jesus's use of the story of David is that (1) Jesus has authority like David; (2) Jesus presents himself as the Messiah and an antitype of David; or (3) Jesus sees himself as greater than David and/or the Temple. In sum, scholars compare Jesus with David and that Jesus has authority to ignore the law. Questions that might proceed from the above scholarly positions on the text are: Why did Jesus use David's story to answer the question of the Pharisees in Matt 12:3-4? And what hermeneutic principle did Matthean Jesus use in Matthew 12:3-4?

### **A Hermeneutical Appraisal of Jesus' Use of David's Story in Matt 12:3-4**

New Testament scholarship generally understands the use of David's story in Matt 12:3-4 as either (1) rabbinic hermeneutics (*gezerah Shewah*) or (2) typological hermeneutics. However, there are gaps in research as to the rationale of Jesus's use of David's story and hermeneutical scheme employed by Jesus as a response to the legitimacy of his disciples plucking of grains and eating on the Sabbath. Essential questions arising in connection with this subject includes the following: (1) did Jesus use typological or analogical hermeneutics as he used David's story? (2) On what grounds and to what extent should analogical or typological hermeneutics be employed in understanding the first Sabbath conflict episode as scholars have already done? (3) Did the use of the story have any Christological implication in the context of Matthew? (4) On what basis is Christological reading allowed?

#### **Analysis of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4 (Cf.1 Sam 21:1-6)**

The table below gives a snapshot of David's example in Matthew 12:3-4. The analysis of the table below points that Matthew compares David and those with him to the disciples of Jesus. By implication, Jesus assumes the position of Ahimelech, the priest, who allowed David and those with him eat the showbread, which otherwise was

not lawful for them to eat. Jesus also permitted (or did not prohibit or censure) his disciples to pluck heads of grain to eat on Sabbath.

*Analysis of David's Example in Matthew 12:3-4 (Cf.1 Sam 21:1-6)*

David and those with him	Jesus's disciples
They were hungry (Matt 12:3)	They were hungry (Matt 12:1)
They ate the showbread (v. 4)	They plucked heads of grain and ate on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1)
It was not lawful for them to eat the showbread (Matt 12:4; cf Lev 24:9)	The Pharisees accused Jesus's disciples that what they did was unlawful (Matt 12: 2)
Scripture did not condemn them for doing so (implied).	The Pharisees should not condemn the disciples for doing so (implied).

From the table above, Matthew seems to compare Jesus with Ahimelech, the priest. The followings are the reasons: (1) David and his companions were hungry (Matt 12:3; cf. 1 Sam 21:3); the disciples were hungry (Matt 12:1). (2) David and his men ate the showbread (Matt 12:4); the disciples ate the heads of grain (Matt 12:1). (3) David did what was not ordinarily permitted to do (Matt 12:4; 1 Sam 21:4); the Pharisees accused the disciples of doing what was not permitted to do on the Sabbath (Matt 12:2). (4) Ahimelech was responsible for the action of David at Nob (implied); Jesus is responsible for the action of the disciples (implied); (5) Ahimelech, the priest, interpreted the law to allow David and his companion to eat the showbread (1 Sam 12:4-6); Jesus interprets the law in defence of the disciples that they are innocent of the accusation of the Pharisees (Matt 12:3-4). The comparisons above seem to suggest that Matthew compares the disciples with David and his men. It also suggests that Matthew compares Jesus with the priest. This helps in drawing the best conclusion from the example in Matt 12:3-4.

### **The Rationale for the Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:3-4**

In the setting of the actual event of the first Sabbath conflict, David's story had no messianic significance to the immediate audience of the story. The immediate audience includes the Pharisees and the disciples. To the Pharisees, in particular, David's story might seem

to be an analogy which fit into their hermeneutics (*gezerah shewah*, a rabbinic hermeneutic scheme). This scheme compares similar laws and their applications to real life situations. Since the story of David is situated in a cultic setting which is rooted in the Torah (I Sam 21:1-6; cf. Exod 25:30; Lev 24:1-9), the Pharisees might have understood Jesus' use of David's story as *gezerah shevah* (analogical hermeneutic) which was rabbinic. Thus, in the setting of Jesus, David's story was probably used to silence the Pharisees since the two situations required the breaking of cultic law.

It is noteworthy that any statement that suggested that Jesus was placing himself at par with the divine or identifying himself as the Messiah, the Pharisees registered their disapproval. For instance, when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic, the Pharisees considered his words as blasphemous (Matt 9:2-3). The Pharisees understood Jesus as a teacher (Matt 8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 22:16, 36). In 12:3-4 Jesus used *gezerah shewah* as a hermeneutical scheme to give further details about the law, that the Sabbath regulations could be relaxed for a genuine need.

In the setting of Matthew, the use of David's story in Matt 12:3-4 should be considered in the whole story of Matthew. The role of David's story in the gospel of Matthew needs considerable discussion. Matt 12:1-8 was to emphasize the authority of Jesus as the antitype of the priest, Ahimelech who was the interpreter of the law. Matthew seems to compare David and his men with the disciples of Jesus. By inference, Matthew seems to compare the authority of the priest (who allowed David and his men to eat the showbread) with that of Jesus (who allowed the disciples to pluck heads of grain and eat on Sabbath). Matthew's interest in the background of Jesus as a Jew, and portrayal of Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophets and Temple services and ministry, seems to support this position.

Moreover, Matthew's second argument (vv. 5-6), which is uniquely Matthew's, points to the Temple and the priests who minister in it. The second argument (vv. 5-6) gives the impression that Matthew's emphasis in David's story is the authority of Jesus as priest, Ahimelech, in permitting others to do what was not permissible by cultic regulations. Thus, Matthew uses David's story differently (from Mark and Luke) in the Matthean context. Matthew is concerned with the rabbinic hermeneutic. Jesus as the image of the Godhead in the incarnated-priestly ministry. Thus, Mathew's audience might have understood Matthew 12:3-6 that Jesus is the antitype of the priest (who interpreted the law and offered sacrifices

on the Sabbath on behalf of Israel) and the temple (the dwelling place of God).

Presumably, the audience of Matthew may have seen the Emmanuel concept clearer with the use of strings of OT references as rebuttals to the Pharisees' accusation. Matthew seems to compare Jesus with the priest and temple. Matthew uses David's story to portray Jesus as the antitype of the priest who was the interpreter of the law. Thus, in the context of Matthew, the rationale for the use of David's story is typological.

Matthew seems to compare Jesus with Ahimelech, the priest. The followings are the reasons: (1) David and his companions were hungry (Matt 12:3; cf. 1 Sam 21:3); the disciples were hungry (Matt 12:1). (2) David and his men ate the showbread (Matt 12:4); the disciples ate the heads of grain (Matt 12:1). (3) David did what was not ordinarily permitted to do (Matt 12:4; 1 Sam 21:4); the Pharisees accused the disciples of doing what was not permitted to do on the Sabbath (Matt 12:2). (4) Ahimelech was responsible for the action of David at Nob; Jesus is responsible for the action of the disciples; (5) Ahimelech, the priest, interpreted the law to allow David and his companion to eat the showbread (1 Sam 12:4-6); Jesus interprets the law in defence of the disciples that they are innocent of the accusation of the Pharisees. The comparisons above seem to suggest that Matthew compares the disciples with David and his men. It also suggests that Matthew compares Jesus with the priest. This helps in drawing the best conclusion from the example in Matt 12:3-4.

## Findings

An important aspect of gospel study is the recognition of the different setting of Jesus and the Evangelists. The results of this study have revealed the following:

First, Jesus used analogical hermeneutics as he used David's story in the setting of Jesus. Thus, the primary audience of Jesus, the Pharisees and the disciples might have understood David's story in Matt 12:3-4 as *gezerah shewah* (a rabbinic hermeneutics). However, the audience of Matthew (the setting of the author) might have understood David's story as a typological hermeneutics, in the context of the entire gospel of Matthew. Jesus as the image of the Godhead in the incarnated-priestly ministry. Thus, Mathew's audience might have understood Matthew 12:3-6 that Jesus is the antitype of the priest (who interpreted the law and offered sacrifices on the Sabbath on behalf of Israel) and the temple (the dwelling place



of God). Presumably, the audience of Matthew may have seen the Emmanuel concept clearer with the use of strings of OT references as rebuttals to the Pharisees' accusation.

Second, the audience of Jesus (Jesus's setting) might have understood the story of David as portraying Jesus as a rabbi who used his knowledge of hermeneutics to further explain the Sabbath law. They might have understood the first Sabbath conflict, Matt 12:1-8, as Jesus using *gezerah shewah* to explain that in both the situation of David and the disciples, a cultic regulation was violated. That since Scripture does not condemn David, the Pharisees should not condemn his disciples. They might have also understood that divine command can set aside the Sabbath law as in the situation of the priests' sacrifice on Sabbath (Matt 12:5; cf., Lev 28:9-10). Thus, if the Temple work can make the priests sacrifice on Sabbath blameless, similarly, Jesus' disciples are blameless since they work with him, who (and whose ministry) is greater than the Temple (and its ministry) (v. 6).

Third, to Jesus's audience, the use of the story of David might have no Christological implications. The reason is that, if the Pharisees understood the story Christologically, then, they might have accused Jesus as blaspheming (cf., 9:3). The Pharisees understood Jesus as a teacher (Matt 8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 22:16, 36). However, in the context of Matthew, David's story has Christological implication. Jesus is the antitype of the priest who was the interpreter of the law. Inferred from the story of David is the interpretation of the cultic law and the authority of the priest, Ahimelech, to give David and his colleagues the showbread. As Ahimelech, the Priest, used his authority to allow David and his companions eat the showbread, so too Jesus used his authority to permit his disciples to pluck heads of grain and eat on the Sabbath. Implied in both stories is that both Ahimelech and Jesus are interpreters of cultic laws.

Fourth, Christological reading is allowed on the basis of reading the first Sabbath conflict, Matt 12:1-8, in the context of the whole gospel of Matthew. Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the fulfillment of priest, temple and all the OT types. Typological reading of the text is, thus, allowed in the context of the whole gospel of Matthew.

## **Implications**

The results of this study are foreseen to provide the following implications: Jesus had authority to clarify the law in specific cases for his disciples. In 12:3-4 Jesus used *gezerah shewah* as a hermeneutical scheme to give further details about the law, that the Sabbath regulations could be relaxed for a genuine need. In 12:5-6 Jesus again used *gezerah shewah* as a hermeneutical scheme to give further details about the law, that the Sabbath regulations could be relaxed by another divine instruction. In 12:7 Jesus emphasized that mercy should be the underlining force of interpreting the Sabbath regulations. And in 12:8 Jesus as the master/Lord of the Sabbath should be understood in the context of his authority to interpret the law regarding the observance of the Sabbath.