

Nathan Eubank

Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin

Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die
neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
und die Kunde der älteren Kirche

Herausgegeben von

James D. G. Dunn · Carl R. Holladay
Hermann Lichtenberger · Jens Schröter
Gregory E. Sterling · Michael Wolter

Band 196

De Gruyter

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The Economy of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel

De Gruyter

ISBN 978-3-11-030384-1
e-ISBN 978-3-11-030407-7
ISSN 0171-6441

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the DeutscheNationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen
∞ Printed on acid-free paper
Printed in Germany
www.degruyter.com

For Jessie

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Duke University and the James B. Duke Fund for providing the financial support that allowed me to devote most of my time to this project. The members of my committee were all enormously helpful to me in one way or another. Ellen Davis read the entire dissertation during a very busy semester and offered invaluable feedback and encouragement. I am also grateful to Professor Davis for her extraordinary help in navigating the mercurial requirements of the Graduate Program in Religion. Mark Goodacre's unparalleled knowledge of the Gospels and of the relevant secondary literature was a great help to me, and I am grateful to him for taking the time to provide detailed feedback. Surely it is rare that a dogmatic theologian shows up at a dissertation defense with Greek New Testament in hand, ready to discuss both conceptual matters and the minutiae of the Greek text, but Reinhard Hütter is one such theologian. His advice on matters theological and practical has helped me in more ways than I can express. Kavin Rowe has been a constant source of wise counsel. I am grateful for that and for his willingness to help me tease out the significance of my arguments. Finally, thanks are due to my advisor, Richard Hays. When I first came to Duke as a MTS student I took Professor Hays's Introduction to the New Testament class. It only took a few weeks of listening to him talk about the New Testament for me to decide that this is what I wanted to do with my life. I have enjoyed learning from him in the years since then, and I am grateful to him for his brilliant and incisive comments on this study – comments given while he was also working as Dean of the Divinity School – as well as for his enthusiasm for the project.

Thanks are due also to a number of friends who helped me with this project either by reading some portion of it or by talking through some aspect of it with me, including Gary Anderson, Hans Arneson, Douglas Campbell, Stephen Carlson, Carl-Magnus Carlstein, Natalie Carnes, Joel Decker, Sarah Decker, Rebekah Eklund, Ben Gordon, Bradley C. Gregory, Paul Griffiths, Nancy Hütter, John Kincaid, Joel Marcus, Tom McGlothlin, Dave Moffitt, Brant Pitre, John Sehorn, Matthew Thiessen, and Msgr. John Williams. Rodrigo Morales and Matthew

Whelan both read the entire dissertation and offered helpful comments. A special thank you is due to T. J. Lang who has been a great friend and colleague since we both arrived at Duke in 2003. T.J. discussed this project with me day in and day out, and he read every chapter as I wrote them and provided extensive and insightful comments.

My parents, Geoffrey and Pamela Eubank, have been indefatigable in their support of and enthusiasm for my work. From reading the dissertation to praying for its daily progress, they have helped me in more ways than I can name. I also want to mention my grandmother, Mary Jean Moore, who has encouraged me with her generosity and love. My parents-in-law, Kent and Connie Arthur, helped get me started by buying me my first laptop and have continued to support me with cigars and good conversations, among other things. My children, Mary, Scott, Benjamin, and Thomas (who arrived when I had only one chapter left to write) have an unmatched ability to help me think about something other than my work. I am grateful for their support and especially for their goofiness. The biggest debt of all is due to my wife Jessie. Her love, patience, and sense of humor seem to know no bounds. As a small gesture of my gratitude I dedicate this project to her.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Justification for the Study	1
2. “Atonement”	12
3. Interpretive Method	15
4. Distinguishing <i>ab quo</i> , <i>ad quem</i> , and <i>de quo</i> (Or: What is Matthew about?)	18
1 Heavenly Treasure and Debts in Early Judaism and Christianity	25
1.1 Introduction	25
1.2 Heavenly Treasures and Debts before the First Century	27
1.3 First and Second Century Apocalypses	34
1.4 Rabbinic literature	39
1.5 Earliest Christian literature	44
1.6 Summary	50
2 Heavenly Treasures and Debts in Matthew	53
2.1 Debts	53
2.1.1 “Cancel our Debts for us” (6:9–15) and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23–35)	53
2.1.2 Pay back all you owe (18:34–35; 5:21–26)	56
2.1.3 Fill up the measure (23:32; 7:1–2)	63
2.2 Treasures	68
2.2.1 Key terms (μισθός, ἀποδίδωμι, κληρονομέω)	68
2.2.2 Treasures “in” the Heavens	71
2.2.3 Sermon on the Mount	74
2.2.3.1 Beatitudes (5:3–12)	74
2.2.3.2 “Antitheses” (5:21–48) and Doing Righteousness (6:1–18)	77
2.2.3.3 Treasure in Heaven and the Sound Eye (6:19–24)	80
2.2.3.4 Summary	84
2.2.3 The Missionary Discourse (10:1–42)	85
2.2.4 First Passion Prediction (16:13–28)	89

2.2.5	The Rich Young Man and the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (19:16–20:16)	91
2.2.6	Parable of the Just and Unjust Servants (24:45–51), the Parable of the Talents (25:14–30) and the Sheep and the Goats (25:31–46)	99
2.3	Conclusion	104
3	Filling Up All Righteousness: Salvation from the Debt of Sin	109
3.1	Introducing Jesus (1:1–3:12)	109
3.2	Filling Up All Righteousness (3:13–17)	121
3.3	Conclusion	132
4	Wages of Cross-Bearing: Eternal Life, Glorious Thrones, and the Ransom-Price for Captive Debtors	133
4.1	Introduction	133
4.2	Cross-bearers will be Repaid with Eternal Life (16:21–28)	134
4.3	The Thrones of the Son of Man and the Apostles (19:16–29)	139
4.4	Contrast with Gentile kings (20:17–28)	144
4.5	The Ransom-Price for Many	148
4.5.1	Deliverance from Captivity	152
4.5.2	The price of release as heavenly treasure	154
4.6	Excursus: similar early Jewish and Christian references to atoning death	162
4.7	Conclusion	168
5	“Behold, Your Savior Comes, His Wage is with Him”: The Passion and Resurrection	169
5.1	Introduction	169
5.2	Behold, your king comes with his wage in his hand (21:5)	171
5.3	The passion and resurrection narrative (26:1–28:20)	175
5.3.1	The Last Supper	175
5.3.1.1	Excursus: treasure in heaven and sacrifice	178
5.3.2	Gethsemane (26:36–56)	180
5.3.3	Enduring persecution (26:57–27:50)	181
5.3.4	The death of Jesus and the preliminary repayment of heavenly treasure (27:45–28:20)	184
5.3.5	The eschatological down payment (27:45–54)	189
5.3.6	A final note on inference and redaction	196
5.4	Conclusion	197

Conclusion	199
1. Summary	199
2. Debt-Captivity and the Price of Release Revisited	202
3. Issues for ongoing research	206
4. Conclusion	209
Bibliography	210
Index of Modern Authors	223
Index of Ancient Sources	227
I. Old Testament	227
II. Other Jewish Sources	228
III. New Testament	230
IV. Early Christian	234

Introduction

1. Justification for the Study

In comparison to Mark and Luke, Matthew's Gospel contains a striking preponderance of economic imagery, especially in passages dealing with sin, righteousness, and divine recompense.¹ This cluster of economic terms is found in every strand of tradition in Matthew's Gospel, and frequently appears to be the result of Matthean redaction. A good chunk of this language occurs in five uniquely Matthean parables dealing either with the pricelessness of the kingdom or judgment and reward (the hidden treasure in 13:44; the pearl in 13:45–46; the parable of the unforgiving servant in 18:23–35; the parable of the workers in the vineyard 20:1–16; the sheep and the goats in 25:31–46). Matthean additions to the triple tradition also tend to contain economic language. For instance, in 16:27 Matthew alone mentions that when the Son of Man comes in the glory of his Father he will render what is due (ἀποδώσει) to each according to his deeds (cf. Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). Likewise, economic language is frequently found in Matthean “pluses” in the double tradition. For instance, much of the Sermon on the Mount deals with the wage due to one who practices righteousness without attempting to receive credit from other people (e.g., 6:1–19). Most of this material is absent from Luke. Similarly, Matthew 5:46 speaks of the “wage” (ὁ μισθός) which is due one who loves her enemies, whereas Luke 6:33 speaks of the “favor” (χάρις) of such a person. While there have been studies of recompense in Matthew, I am aware of no study of any length that has examined Matthew's understanding of wages

1 E.g., ὁ μισθός (wages): 9/1/3; κερδαίνω (to acquire by effort or investment): 6/1/1; ἀπέχω in the sense of receiving in full what is due: 3/0/1; ἀποδίδωμι in the sense of rendering what is due: 14/1/8; συναίρω (to settle accounts): 3/0/0. Συναίρω never appears anywhere else in the NT or LXX. There is a cluster of words describing debt: τό δάνειον: 1/0/0; τό ὀφείλημα: 1/0/0; ὁ ὀφειλότης: 2/0/1. There is also ὁ θησαυρός and θησαυρίζω (treasure/to store up treasure): 11/1/5; πιπράσκω (to sell): 3/1/0. For a helpful study of economics in Luke see Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

and debts and the import of this language for Matthew's narrative as a whole.

This lacuna becomes more conspicuous in light of Gary Anderson's recent study, *Sin: A History*.² Anderson shows that financial language provided the conceptual framework for speaking of good and bad deeds beginning in the later strata of the Hebrew Bible and stretching on into early Judaism and Christianity. In Aramaic, Anderson notes, "the word for a debt that one owes a lender, *hōbā*, is the standard term for denoting sin. This term comes into Second Temple Hebrew and has the same double meaning. The earlier idea of sin as a weight is rarely found in rabbinic Hebrew, having been replaced by the idea of sin as a debt."³ Anderson illustrates this transformation by showing how the Targumim almost always translate the phrase **נשא עון** when it refers to sin with the Aramaic idiom **קבל חובא**. For instance, Leviticus 5:1 ("If a person should sin...he shall bear the weight of his sin [**ונשא עונו**]") is translated "If a person becomes obligated [by sin]...he assumes a debt (**ויקביל חוביה**).⁴ Perhaps the most famous instance of sin as debt in the New Testament is in the Matthean version of the Our Father: "Forgive us our debts (**τὰ ὀφειλήματα**) as we also forgive our debtors (**τοῖς ὀφειλέταις**).⁵ Matthew's restatement of the petition in verses 14–15 ("For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you") shows that "debt" is used here to refer to sin. Closely related to the idea of sin as debt was the notion of righteous deeds as earning credit – **שכר** or **זכוח**, as the rabbis called it, or, in Matthew's idiom, wages (**μισθός**) or treasures in heaven (**θησαυροὶ ἐν οὐρανῷ**).

The basic claims of Anderson's insightful and far-reaching study are difficult to contest.⁴ Still, even if one should quibble with Anderson's contention that the language of debt and credit formed the basic building blocks for understanding sin and righteousness in early Judaism and Christianity, the Gospel according to Matthew, which receives scant attention in *Sin*, is replete with such language.⁵ Previous scholarship has

2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

3 Ibid., 27.

4 Cf. Joseph Lam's assessment: "There is not much with which to quarrel in terms of Anderson's broad historical argument. The metaphorical transition from sin as burden to sin as debt is highly conspicuous in the primary sources, and it is perhaps the fault of biblical scholarship that this conceptual shift has not been adequately emphasized in previous discussions." Review of Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History*, RBL [http://www.bookreviews.org] (2010).

5 Anderson's treatment of the Synoptic Gospels is largely limited to Mark.

not been unaware that Matthew has much to say about sin, righteousness, and divine recompense, but this scholarship has failed to attend to the particularities of this language and its role in the narrative. The result of this, as I shall argue, is that these studies have, in significant respects, failed to understand what Matthew is about. I shall outline three deficiencies in previous treatments of Matthew's financial language.

First, many studies have focused on the teaching of Jesus as a whole, or even the entire New Testament, and have not attended to Matthew's narrative dynamics. For instance, Paul S. Minear's 1941 monograph, *And Great Shall Be Your Reward: The Origins of Christian Views of Salvation*, treats selected Synoptic pericopae,⁶ as does Wilhelm Pesch's *Der Lohngedanke in der Lehre Jesu: Verglichen mit der religiösen Lohnlehre des Spätjudentums*.⁷ Studies that have focused exclusively on Matthew have tended to treat the question of recompense without reference to its role in the story as a whole.⁸

Second, previous work on recompense in Matthew has ignored the specific conceptual register of much of this language, the grammar that gave these concepts meaning in Matthew's day – that of debt and wages. For instance, some studies of recompense in Matthew frame the question in terms of his relationship to Paul and his understanding of grace (χάρις) – a word-group that never appears in Matthew.⁹ Yet, the only way to understand what Matthew says about what we might call “grace” is to enter into Matthew's own field of discourse. Another example is Blaine Charette's 1992 study, *The Theme of Recompense in Matthew's Gospel*, which situates Matthew against the background of Old Testament promises of reward for observing God's commandments and punishment for failing to do so, but does not attend to the partic-

6 (YSR 12; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941).

7 (Munich: Karl Zink, 1955). See also Bo Reicke, “The New Testament Conception of Reward,” in *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne: Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (Bibliothèque théologique; Paris: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1950), 195–206; Günther Bornkamm, “Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament,” in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (2 vols.; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1963), 2.69–92.

8 E.g., recently, Sigurd Grindheim, “Ignorance is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment according to Works in Matthew 25:31–46,” *NovT* 50 (2008): 313–31.

9 E.g. Grindheim, “Ignorance is Bliss,” 313–31; Donald A. Hagner, “Law, Righteousness, and Discipleship in Matthew,” *WW* 18 (1998): 364–71; Roger Mohrland, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

ularities of first-century understandings of sin and righteousness.¹⁰ Charette moves directly from recompense as found in the Hebrew Bible to Matthew, though there were broad shifts in the way recompense was understood throughout the strata of the Hebrew Bible and in the second temple period.¹¹

Third, many, if not most, discussions of the wages of sin and righteousness in Matthew have treated the issue as a theological embarrassment that needs to be explained and have produced predictably one-sided results.¹² Günther Bornkamm offers a candid summary of the consternation that New Testament scholars have faced with the *Lohngedanken* of the New Testament:

We find ourselves with a marked bias against the idea of wage [or “reward”] in the New Testament. Educated in the Kantian conception of duty [*Pflicht*], we immediately connect with the idea of wage the prospect of a debased eudaemonism that clouds the purity of a moral ethos. The idea of wage in ethics, so it is said, makes people’s deeds dependent on extrinsic ends. The human will can no longer govern freely only by the suitability of its maxims. It strains after the outcome of its actions and no longer does the good for its own sake. The idea of wage is opposed to the high ideal, on which Plato, the Stoics, and Idealism agree, that justice is its own wage.

10 (JSNTSup 79; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

11 It is not uncommon for NT scholars to make “the Old Testament” – as circumscribed by the text and canon of the Masoretic tradition – the context for understanding the NT, thereby ignoring the manifold versions and interpretations of Israel’s Scriptures that were actually in play in the first century. To his credit, Charette is unusually clear that this is what he is doing, though this clarity brings the anachronism into sharp relief. In Charette’s own words, “The question as to whether (and if so, how) other writings subsequent to the Old Testament may have influenced Matthew is not of interest to the present study. For that reason, parallels to other materials (e.g. Deutero-canonical writings, Qumran texts, Rabbinic works) have not been cited. Since it is indisputable that Matthew was influenced by the Old Testament, it makes for a sound methodology to turn first to the Old Testament for insight before looking elsewhere” (*Theme of Recompense*, 19). There is a kernel of truth here: there can be no doubt that, say, Genesis or the Psalms were important to the Evangelist, whereas a text like *Joseph and Aseneth* is of questionable significance. The problem is that Charette et al. imagine a canonical and textual stability that did not exist in the first century. Worse yet is the fact that Charette’s approach ignores the crucial question of how texts such as Genesis or the Psalms were interpreted in the first century.

12 Minear’s *And Great Shall Be Your Reward* and Charette’s *Theme of Recompense* are notable exceptions to this rule, though the former treats Matthew only sparingly.

Hence our *moral* misgivings against the idea of wage. The role played by the idea of wage in Catholic teaching on morals and justification strengthens our aversion to it even more. The concept of wage sanctions the concept of merit, and indeed, as it seems, with an undeniable logical consistency. For what can the concept of wage mean other than the payment that is due for work done? Do not wage and effort, wage and merit belong together in an indestructible relationship, so that whoever says the one [sc. “wage”] must also say the other [sc. “merit”]? And do not late Judaism and Catholicism, with their doctrine of the merit of good works, take the concept of “wage,” which the Bible of the Old and New Testaments offers to them, just at its word? And do they not have the courage to draw out the implications for ethics and the doctrine of justification?... Hence our *religious* misgivings against the idea of wage.¹³

Indeed, Kant’s conception of duty (*Pflicht*) – as well as the characteristically Protestant concerns behind it – cast a surprisingly long shadow over studies of wage in the New Testament.¹⁴ For Kant, duty cannot

13 “Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament,” 2.69–92. The original: “Wir befinden uns dem Lohngedanken des Neuen Testamentes gegenüber in einer merkwürdigen Befangenheit. Erzogen in dem Kantischen Begriff der Pflicht, verbinden wir sofort mit dem Begriff Lohn die Vorstellung eines unterwertigen Eudamonismus, der die Reinheit sittlicher Gesinnung trübt. Der Lohngedanke in der Ethik, so heisst es, macht das Handeln des Menschen abhängig von fremden Zwecken, der menschliche Wille lässt sich nicht mehr in Freiheit bestimmen einzig von der Tauglichkeit seiner Maximen, er schielt nach dem Erfolg seines Tuns und tut das Gute nicht mehr um seiner selbst willen. Der Lohngedanke ist dem hohen Grundsatz, in dem Plato, die Stoa und der Idealismus einig sind, entgegengesetzt, dass nämlich die Gerechtigkeit ihren Lohn in sich selbst trage. Von daher unser *moralisches* Bedenken gegen den Lohngedanken. In der Abneigung gegenüber dem Lohngedanken bestärkt uns aber erst recht seine Verwendung in der katholischen Moral und Rechtfertigungslehre. Der Begriff des Lohnes sanktioniert ja hier den Begriff des Verdienstes, und zwar, wie es scheint, mit einer unbestreitbaren logischen Folgerichtigkeit. Denn was kann der Begriff des Lohnes anderes meinen, als ein schuldiges Entgelt für eine geleistete Arbeit? Gehören nicht Lohn und Leistung, Lohn und Verdienst in einer unzerstörbaren Korrelation zusammen, so daß, wer das eine sagt, auch das andere sagen muß? Und nehmen nicht etwa das späte Judentum und der Katholizismus mit ihrer Lehre von der Verdienstlichkeit der guten Werke den Begriff „Lohn“, den ihnen die Bibel Alten und Neuen Testamentes bietet, einfach nur beim Wort, und haben sie nicht eben nur den Mut, die Konsequenzen aus ihm für die Ethik und Rechtfertigungslehre zu ziehen? ... Von daher unser *religiöses* Bedenken gegenüber dem Lohngedanken.” (2.69–70)

14 E.g., F. C. Baur, *Vorlesungen über neutestamentliche Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1864), 60–3; Ulrich Luz on Kant’s influence on the interpretation of Matt 20:1–16 (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [4 vols.; EKKNT; Düsseldorf: Benziger, 1985–2002], 3.144).

be based on anything hypothetical or contingent, such as the promise of some happy outcome.¹⁵ No deed can have moral worth if it is done to attain something extrinsic to the deed itself. As Kant himself put it, “Die Tugend in ihrer eigentlichen Gestalt erblicken, ist nichts anderes als die Sittlichkeit von aller Beimischung des Sinnlichen und allem unechten Schmuck des Lohns oder der Selbstliebe entkleidet darzustellen.”¹⁶

Kant’s seminal contention that the pursuit of *Lohn* is antithetical to virtue placed New Testament scholars in an awkward position, for Jesus seemed to have a lot to say about how to receive a *Lohn bei eurem Vater im Himmel* (Matt 6:1), as Luther’s translation put it. In 1950 Bo Reicke noted that earlier generations of scholars were so influenced by Kant that they tended to deny that the New Testament said anything at all about rewards; twentieth century scholars, while less apt to deny outright the existence of rewards in the New Testament, still faced “great problems as to how this reward should be conceived.”¹⁷ Those who have attempted to deal with these problems have tended to rely on one or more of the following claims: (1) Jesus did not use wages to motivate his followers. His commands, therefore, still qualify as “duty.” (2) Jesus admittedly talked about rewards from God, but only to transcend and subvert the notions of reward that were current in his day. (3) The parable of the workers in the vineyard is the key to understanding Jesus’ conception of wage, and its significance in the NT as a whole.

Strack and Billerbeck, who devote a chapter to the parable of the workers in the vineyard and its significance for understanding the contrast between the New Testament teaching on wage and that of ancient Judaism, illustrate this approach.¹⁸ They aver that Jews thought that humans could do meritorious deeds that God would reward, whereas Jesus taught that one must leave behind every thought of reward and simply do one’s duty. The question posed to the workers hired at the 11th hour

15 Duty is “eine Nötigung zu einem ungern genommenen Zweck.” *Metaphysik der Sitten* (Philosophische Bibliothek 42; Leipzig: Dürr’schen, 1907), 386. And again, “Wir haben soviel also wenigstens dargetan, dass, wenn Pflicht ein Begriff ist, der Bedeutung und wirkliche Gesetzgebung für unsere Handlungen enthalten soll, diese nur in kategorischen Imperativen, keineswegs aber in hypothetischen ausgedrückt werden könne.” *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (Philosophische Bibliothek 41; Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1925), 425.

16 *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 426.

17 “The New Testament Conception of Reward,” 196.

18 *Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (6 vols.; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1928), 4:484–500.

(“Why are you standing here idle all day?”) shows that “zur Mitarbeit im Reiche Gottes jeder ohne Ausnahme verpflichtet ist. Die Lohnfrage spielt dabei keine Rolle, sie wird gar nicht berührt; nur die Arbeitspflicht ist von prinzipieller Bedeutung.”¹⁹ Similarly, the remark of the landowner in 20:15 to the grumblers (“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”) shows that:

Work for God’s kingdom does not proceed on the basis of a legal agreement between God and humans, so that the divine wage would correspond to human achievement, but rather the work is simply the duty of humans to be done without any regard for wages... This is the cornerstone and headstone of the New Testament teaching on wages, which is closely related to the New Testament teaching on justification.²⁰

Like most scholars who address the issue up to the present day, Strack and Billerbeck assume without argument that the parable of the workers in the vineyard is the key to the New Testament understanding of wage. While detailed exegesis of the parable must wait until chapter 2, it is worth noting that the drama of the parable springs from the fact that those who were paid a standard wage for their work are offended by the master’s decision to pay those who were hired late in the day more than they deserve. The scandal, in other words, is in the master’s decision to be generous to those who had not worked the whole day; there is little hint that the workers are to forget the very concept of payment in favor of the pure *Pflicht* that is its own reward.²¹

The history of scholarship since Strack and Billerbeck reveals more of the same. In the mid-twentieth century Preisker and Würthwein placed a special emphasis on the workers in the vineyard in their article on μισθός in *TWNT*, arguing that Jesus admittedly spoke of reward, but this was only to transcend and free himself from the Jewish concept of

19 Ibid., 485

20 Ibid. “Die Arbeit für Gottes Reich vollzieht sich nicht auf Grund eines Rechtsvertrages zwischen Gott u. Mensch, so dass der göttliche Lohn der menschlichen Leistung entspreche, sondern die Arbeit ist einfach des Menschen Pflicht, die zu leisten ist ohne jede Rücksicht auf Lohn.... Das ist der Grund- u. Eckstein der neutestamentlichen Lohnlehre, die aufs engste mit der neutestamentlichen Rechtfertigungslehre zusammenhängt.”

21 H. Heinemann (“The Conception of Reward in Mat. XX. 1 16,” *JJS* 1 [1948]: 85–9) offers a very brief but incisive refutation of Strack and Billerbeck’s exegesis as well as of their treatment of rabbinic literature.

merit.²² Commenting on Matthew 6, Jeremias averred, “Hier ist deutlich, dass Jesus zwar die Vokabel ‘vergelt’ aufnimmt, dass er aber sachlich voraussetzt, dass seine Jünger sich völlig von dem Lohnstreben gelöst haben; sie sollen ja vergessen, was sie Gutes taten.”²³ Bornkamm claimed that the New Testament is free of eudaemonism, which “macht ja das Urteil über Gut und Böse abhängig von den Folgen, die unser Handeln hat.”²⁴ Though Jesus spoke of reward in the Sermon on the Mount, his command “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (6:3) shows that Jesus forbade his followers to make heavenly reward a motive for their actions.²⁵ Similarly, in 25:31–46 the surprise of the “sheep” when the Lord tells them they have inherited the kingdom because of their deeds shows that one must do meritorious deeds without realizing they are such.²⁶

22 “μισθός,” *TWNT*, 4.725.

23 *Neutestamentliche Theologie* (2 vols.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 1.209. It is not apparent how Jeremias knows that the disciples have detached themselves from striving for a reward; indeed, this speculation would seem to run against the grain of Jesus’ command to “Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven” (6:20), and his instructions on how to avoid losing one’s heavenly wage by seeking a wage from people (6:1–18). Cf., also on the preceding page: “Nun darf man aber nicht übersehen, dass Jesus an die Sprechweise der Zeit anknüpft, wenn er vom Lohn redet. Die religiöse Sprache ist konservativ, und vor allen Dingen in polemischen Zusammenhängen muss man von der Sprache der Gegner ausgehen” (208).

24 “Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament,” 79.

25 “Wenn die Rechte nicht wissen darf, was die Linke tut, so heisst das ja nichts anderes, als dass nicht nur die andern, nein, nicht einmal der Handelnde selbst sich berechnend über sein eigenes Tun erheben darf. Wer den Lohn zum Motiv seines Gehorsams macht, der tut eben das, was Jesus verwehrt; er lässt die Rechte wissen, was die Linke tut; während die Linke die Tat vollbringt, streckt schon die Rechte sich aus, den sicheren Lohn zu erhalten” (*Ibid.*, 80). Perhaps it is unnecessary to point out that this interpretation of 6:3 is a literalistic confusion of Matthew’s hyperbole; not letting the left hand know what the right is doing is a restatement of the main thesis of 6:1–21: do not perform your righteousness for show or you will “have no wage with your Father in heaven” (6:1).

26 *Ibid.*, 80. Grindheim (“Ignorance is Bliss”), Reicke (“The New Testament Conception of Reward,” 203), and Jeremias (*Neutestamentliche Theologie* 209), make the same argument. I note in passing that the surprise of the “sheep” is not in response to the fact that work is rewarded. The surprise concerns *who* gets the wages; not those you might expect, but those who helped “the least of these.” This interpretation is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that the parable itself uses the picture of the Last Judgment to motivate the readers to help “the least of these.”

This Kantian stream of interpretation appears almost everywhere that “reward” in the teaching of Jesus is discussed until the present day.²⁷ In his 1966 article, “The Conception of Reward in the Teaching of Jesus,” G. de Ru concluded:

Service “for reward” is decisively rejected by Jesus. In that sense Kant and Idealism were right, when, because of their rigorous conception of “duty”, they connected with the “conception of reward” the idea of an inferior eudaemonism, that defaces the purity of true morality. Everything that is done with an eye to a reward is egotistic, a residue of hedonism. ... A good deed brings its own reward. As the well-known aphorism of Kant has it: “Die Eudamonie ist die Euthanasie aller rechten Sittlichkeit”.²⁸

Similarly, Florian Voss’s article, “Der Lohn der guten Tat,” suggested that in the Sermon on the Mount wages “dient also nicht dazu, den Menschen zum gerechten Handeln zu motivieren, sie wird hier vielmehr mit der Frage verknüpft, von woher der Lohn, d.h. das dem Tun entsprechende ‘Ergehen’, erwartet wird: von den Menschen oder von Gott.”²⁹ If this were the case, however, one wonders what hortatory force would be left in Jesus’ warning “Beware of doing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward with your Father in heaven” (6:1).

27 This is not to say that all these scholars are dependent on Kant, but that they share the post-Kantian doubt that good deeds should be motivated by hope for recompense of any kind. Explicit anti-Judaism and anti-Catholicism becomes increasingly rare in the latter part of the twentieth century. Cf., also James I. H. McDonald, “The Concept of Reward in the Teaching of Jesus” *ExpTim* 89 (1978): 269–73; Daniel Marguerat (*Le Jugement dans L’Évangile de Matthieu* [2nd ed.; *MdB* 6; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1995], 473) “*Le salaire, pas plus que la crainte du jugement, n’est le mobile de la fidélité éthique*” (emphasis original); Craig Blomberg (“Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?” *JETS* 35 [1992]: 159–72) treats as self-evident the pre-eminent place of the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

28 *NovT* 8 (1966): 202–22, 220. In 1968 Klaus Koch began his essay “Der Schatz im Himmel” (in *Leben Angesichts des Todes: Beiträge zum theologischen Problem des Todes: Helmut Thielicke zum 60. Geburtstag* [eds. Bernhard Lohse and H. P. Schmidt; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968], 47–60) noting that “Ein Ergebnis historischer Schriftforschung, das uns heute fremdartig berührt, ist die Rolle des Lohngedankens im Neuen Testament, scheint doch hier die Idee einer berechenbaren Korrespondenz von Leistung und Lohn aufzutauchen, die der Freiheit Gottes hohnspricht” (47–48).

29 “Der Lohn der guten Tat: Zur theologischen Bestimmung der Beziehung zwischen Matthäus und Paulus,” *ZTK* 103 (2006): 333.

A final recent example should suffice to show the enduring influence of this line of interpretation. In his 2007 commentary, R. T. France wrote the following about Matthew 6:19–20:

The verb “store up for yourselves” (literally, “make a treasure for yourselves”) might suggest that these heavenly treasures are to be earned by the disciples’ own efforts, and the frequent language of “reward” in this gospel easily conveys the same impression...[I]n 19:21 it is by giving to the poor that “a treasure in heaven” is to be secured; in 19:29 eternal life is spoken of as compensation for earthly losses, and in 25:21, 33, 34, 46 the heavenly rewards are directly linked to the disciples’ use of earthly opportunities. But while the theme of reward is important in this gospel, we must remind ourselves again that in the parable which most directly addresses the issue (20:1–15) there is a deliberate discrepancy between the effort expended and the recompense received: God does not leave anyone unfairly treated, but his grace is not limited to human deserving. In a kingdom in which the first are last and the last first (19:30; 20:16) there is no room for computing one’s “treasures in heaven” on the basis of earthly effort. *Those treasures are “stored up” not by performing meritorious acts (and certainly not only by almsgiving) but by belonging to and living by the priorities of the kingdom.*³⁰

Few would quibble with France’s contention that, for Matthew, God’s “grace” is not limited to human deserving – though God’s “repayment” would have better fit the Matthean idiom. Nevertheless, like most scholars who comment on reward in Matthew, France provides no rationale for his claim that the parable of the workers in the vineyard is the lens through which all the other passages – including the programmatic Sermon and the climactic 25:14–46 – must be read. Similarly problematic is France’s rather oblique claim that heavenly treasure is not stored up by doing meritorious acts but by “belonging to and living by the priorities of the kingdom.” It is not clear what “belonging to and living by” means in contradistinction to meritorious deeds; one is left with the general impression that for Matthew heavenly treasure is not stored up by selling one’s possessions and giving the money to the poor (19:21) or by any other discrete good deed, but by identifying oneself with the kingdom. Ironically, this construal is close to an inversion of 25:31–46 where it is those who did not know they were serving Jesus but who did in fact do works of mercy who receive the kingdom. That is, those who actually did “meritorious deeds” enter into the kingdom rather than those who assume they belong (cf. also 7:21–22 and 21:28–32).

30 *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 258–59. Emphasis added.

This brief examination of what one might call the Kantian stream of interpretation is not intended to suggest that whereas previous interpreters of heavenly wages in Matthew have been influenced by their prior commitments, I will now provide *das Ding an sich*. Rather, I hope to show only that much of the scholarship relevant to this study has been manifestly influenced by post-Kantian anxieties about recompense for righteousness which are foreign to Matthew.³¹ It should also be noted that the purpose of this study is not to wrest Matthew from a Kantian and Protestant interpretative matrix only to insert it into some other modern framework, still less to engage in inter-confessional polemics. Rather, the goal of the study is to situate Matthew's debt and wage language firmly in its late first-century Jewish context. Indeed, the full force of the critique of previous readings of Matthew will not be apparent until chapter 2 when Matthew's debt and wage language is described against the backdrop of similar language in other early Jewish and Christian literature.³²

31 This is not an endorsement of Kantian epistemology but only an admission of my own situatedness as an interpreter.

32 Not all who have been discomfited by Matthew's economic language have attempted to downplay it or deny its existence. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida's close reading and critique of Matthew in *The Gift of Death* (2d ed.; trans. David Wills; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 82–116. Derrida famously argued that true gift giving is impossible because humans always maintain some expectation of recompense, such as the gratitude of the recipient or even the personal satisfaction of being a gift-giver. For Derrida Matthew, which enjoins one not to let one's left hand know what one's right hand is doing etc., comes tantalizingly close to finding a way around such calculation only to spoil it in the end by succumbing to another sort of calculation: the hope of heavenly treasure. Thus, Matthew's economy begins by renouncing "earthly wages (*merces*) and a finite, accountable, exterior, visible market... only to capitalize on it by means of a profit or surplus value that was infinite, heavenly, incalculable, interior, and secret. A sort of secret calculation would continue to wager on the gaze of a God who sees the invisible, and who sees in my heart what I decline to have seen by my fellow humans" (109). David Bentley Hart's response to Derrida (*The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003], 260–68) is particularly relevant to Matthew. Hart suggests that "the inhuman extremism of a Kantian dogmatism regarding ethical disinterestedness has burdened Derrida with a definition of the gift that is simply a category mistake." The axiom that any desire or self-interest destroys the gift "assumes in some sense the priority of a subjectivity that possesses a moral identity prior to the complex exchanges of moral practices, of gift and gratitude[.] Or, if one has not assumed such a subjectivity, why allow the idea of the gift no wider ambit than is provided by this myth of the punctiliar

2. "Atonement"

A central burden of this study will be to show that Matthew's conception of sin and righteousness is not simply a theme which is more or less incidental to the narrative, but rather that some of the Gospel's central claims about Jesus emerge from this conceptual matrix and should be understood in light of it. To be more specific, a complete account of Matthew's grammar of sin and righteousness must ultimately deal with what is traditionally referred to as "atonement." No study of any length of which I am aware has examined atonement in Matthew in light of Matthew's economic language. I shall argue that this economic language is the idiom that Matthew uses to describe *how* Jesus saves "his people from their sins" (1:21).³³

It would not be incorrect to say, therefore, that this is a study of atonement in Matthew. Nevertheless, to describe the project this way would be misleading in two respects. First, the word "atonement" privileges the default conception of sin of modern westerners: that of alienation or separation.³⁴ The conceptual framework of salvation from sins as at-one-ment (and thus also its obverse, sin as separation) is based in a

self whose ethical integrity consists in a kind of self-sufficient responsibility before an ethical sublime?" (262). Hart problematizes Derrida's argument by pointing out Derrida's implicit modernist commitment to disinterestedness. One might take this critique a step further by historicizing disinterestedness itself as a possibility sustained by the anonymity of capitalist markets. Rather than assuming a univocity in "market" or "exchange," it is necessary to attend to what valences "wages", "repayment", and "exchange" take on in different economic contexts: capitalism, local markets, bartering, the home, etc. In Matthew, the heavenly economy presupposes covenant (26:26–29), divine sonship (5:45; 6:9 etc.), the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and Jesus (10:18–20; 18:19–20; 28:20), and the prior gift of Jesus' life for the many, which is not only vicarious, but also generative of a similar giving back on the part of the many. Payment on earth is indeed renounced in favor of another, heavenly repayment. Yet the more important question of what sort of economy of exchange such heavenly repayment participates in is far from resolved by easy accusations of the tainting influence of market and exchange. See also John Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?", *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 119–61.

33 This is perhaps not a surprise considering the relative paucity of discussions of atonement tout court in Matthean studies. E.g., Luz's *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) contains no discussion of the topic.

34 Matthew does use images of separation to describe the final destination of the reprobate (22:13; 25:41).

spatial metaphor and is not simply a literal description of what sin *is*, despite the fact that atonement/separation has lost its evocative power due to its familiarity. Thus, as regrettable as it may be to marginalize the English language's one lasting contribution to our theological lexicon, I shall attempt to steer clear of the word "atonement" in order to avoid reinforcing the conception of sin and salvation embedded in much modern theology and in hope of enabling a more careful examination of Matthew's own conceptual framework.

Second, to speak of "atonement" or "soteriology" in Matthew is to risk implying that Matthew has something like an "atonement theory" – that is, a systematic, second order description – when there is nothing of the sort in Matthew. If this is a study of atonement, it is from below. To be sure, I shall argue that careful attention to Matthew's grammar of divine recompense in its late first-century Jewish context reveals a coherent description of how Jesus saves his people from their sins.³⁵ In other words, Matthew does not simply assert that Jesus saves his people from their sins and leave the reader to cook up an explanation as to how this happened. Nevertheless, if judged by the standards of subsequent systematic theology, this narrative soteriology leaves many loose ends.

This relatively modest claim, however, goes against the grain of most recent scholarship which has tended to conclude that Matthew's "atonement" language has no apparent meaning or significance. Davies and Allison's expression of bewilderment at 20:28 is frequently cited as representative:

As it stands in Matthew, 20.28 states that Jesus was – note the one-time aorist – an atonement offering, a substitution, a ransom for sins. But almost every question we might ask remains unanswered. What is the condition of 'the many'? Why do they need to be ransomed? To whom is the ransom paid...?...Even when 1.21 and 26.26–9 are taken into account it is impossible to construct a Matthean theory of the atonement. We have in the Gospel only an unexplained affirmation.³⁶

Likewise, Luz writes the following about 20:28: "Der genaue Sinn der Aussage bleibt also relativ unbestimmt. Für Mt ist hier wahrscheinlich weniger der Loskauf- oder 'Ersatz'gedanke wichtig als die Radikalität

35 I use the word "coherent" in contradistinction to "systematic," following the distinction made by E. P. Sanders, ("Did Paul's Theology Develop?" in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays in Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* [ed. J. Ross Wagner et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 325–50).

36 *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 3.100.