

# **Ritual, Medical, Nuptial Purification, a Metaphor of Forgiveness of Sins by Jesus of Nazareth, in Matt 8-9 as Seen from the Perspective of Matt 9,14-17**

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Concern for health and concern for a happy marriage are among the fundamental concerns of humanity. In previous eras, the concern for proper ritual behaviour was also prominent in people's consciousness. At a deeper level, whether sins committed could be forgiven remains perhaps the deepest concern of each human being in any historical era, because, in the words of Confucius, «He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray»<sup>1</sup> (except Heaven himself, of course, but will Heaven forgive me if I pray for

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<sup>1</sup> *Confucian Analects*, Book III, Chapter 13,2. English translation in *The Chinese Classics with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and copious indexes* by James Legge in Five Volumes, I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, n.d. Reprint from last editions of Oxford University Press n.d.) 159. Henceforth, *Confucian Analects*.

forgiveness?) In a previous study<sup>2</sup>, I examined how in Matt 9,14-17 Jesus presents himself as the Bridegroom of 'my Church' (cf. Matt 16,18), inaugurating the divine-human nuptials between God and humanity, forgiveness of sins being the nuptial gift par excellence (cf. Jer 31,34; Ezek 16,62). In the context of Matt 9, Jesus' nuptial self-presentation as the Bridegroom explains the meaning of his and his disciples' feasting (Matt 9,10-13) and non-fasting (Matt 9,14).

In the present article, we would like to pursue the study of how Matt 9,14-17 is situated within the wider context of Matt 8-9. This study will allow us to appreciate the fact that purification from sin (expressed symbolically in ritual purity terms, medical healing terms, and nuptial festive-mourning terms) is an overarching concern of this part of the Gospel according to Matthew, a concern that, in my view, needs to be brought more to the attention of Gospel readers, since it is in danger of being lost in our personal awareness and social culture.

My contention in this article is that, in Matt 8-9, especially when viewed from the perspective of the «nuptial novelty» pericope of Matt 9,14-17, the fundamental concern for forgiveness of sins (existential-moral purification) is hinted at when things, events, and images show up expressive of a «purification concern», things like ritual purity-impurity, medical health-sickness, and nuptial feasting-mourning. In Matt 8-9, ritual purity and impurity show up in a literal

sense (with an added metaphorical sense hinting at forgiveness of sins); medical health and sickness show up both in literal sense and metaphorical sense; nuptial feasting and mourning show up only in metaphorical sense. In all three cases, the metaphorical sense expresses indirectly the reality of forgiveness of sins.

I will proceed in three steps: first, I will offer a general introduction to the «purification concern» that is present in the whole of Sacred Scripture, dwelling especially on «ritual purification»; second, I will give a bird's eye view of Matt 8-9 from the point of view of literary structure and the «purification concern»; third, I will focus on how Matt 9,14-17 relates to its immediately preceding and following contexts in Chapter 9 of the Gospel according to Matthew. I will conclude with a short reflection on results obtained.

## 1. Introduction to the Purification Concern in Sacred Scripture

While we are still familiar with medical and nuptial matters as well as with what forgiveness of sins means, we may be somewhat strangers to the ritual side of the «purification concern», i.e. to matters of ritual «purity-impurity». That is why, in this first section, we try to clarify these notions as they appear in Sacred Scripture, whether Old Testament or New Testament. We will do so by a) distinguishing clearly two couplets of related, but distinct, concepts, namely, «holy-common» and «pure-impure», b) concentrating on the second couplet («pure-impure»), comparing, in this regard, a Jewish view and a Christian view; c) discussing the relationship between ritual and moral purity-impurity, and d) reviewing how

2. L. M. Fedrigotti, *An Exegetical Study of the Nuptial Symbolism in Matthew 9:13. The Bridegroom Who Is Present and Who Will Depart* (Lewinston Queenston – Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006). Henceforth, Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*.

sickness, handicap, and death relate to ritual and moral impurity.

### 1.1 The Couplet «Holy-Common» vs. the Couplet «Pure-Impure»

To begin with, let us read Lev 10,10, a text taken up again by Ezekiel 44,23. Here is the Hebrew and Greek of Lev 10,10 with the RSV<sup>3</sup> translation of both Lev 10,10 and Ezekiel 44,23 (technical terms in bold type, notice the chiastic way of expressing [ABBA]):

Lev 10,10: וְלִהְיֶה בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֹל וּבֵין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר / διαστεῖλαι ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν ἁγίων καὶ τῶν βεβήλων καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν ἀκαθάρτων καὶ τῶν καθαρῶν.

RSV Lev 10,10 «You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the **unclean** and the **clean**».

RSV Ezek 44:23 «[The priests] shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the **unclean** and the **clean**».

To use a simplified transliteration of the above technical terms, the Hebrew for «holy» is *qodesh*, for «common» is *hol*; for «clean» is *tahor*, and for «unclean» is *tame*. The Greek for «holy» is *hagion*, for «common» is *bebelon* (in the NT also, and mainly, *koinon*); for «clean» is *katharon*, for «unclean» is *akatharton*. In what follows, since English translations use different terms to translate the same Hebrew and Greek words, we are compelled to make a terminological choice. In English, the Hebrew-Greek *qodesh-hagion* is translated

both «holy» and «sacred», the Hebrew-Greek *hol-bebelon(koinon)* «common» and «profane», the Hebrew-Greek *tahor-katharon* both «pure» and «clean», and the Hebrew-Greek *tame-akatharton* both «impure» and «unclean». While respecting the choices made by the authors we will be quoting, our own terminological choice is this: for the technical terms *qodesh-hagion*, we shall use «holy», for *hol-bebelon(koinon)* we shall use «common»; for *tahor-katharon* we shall use «pure», for *tame-akatharton* we shall use «impure». There is a disadvantage, for our mainly ritual-religious context, in the use of the English terms «holy-common» and «pure-impure», because today these terms have a mainly ethical-moral connotation. For clarity's sake and to avoid misunderstanding, it would be better to use the distinctly ritual-religious terms «sacred-profane» and «clean-unclean». However, the original Hebrew and Greek normally do not distinguish «holy» and «sacred», «clean» and «pure» and so on. So, to keep the original ambivalence, while distinguishing clearly the two areas of meaning – ritual and ethical – we shall continue to use the terminological couples «holy-common» and «pure-impure».

What is the difference and relationship between the first couple of terms («holy» and «common») and the second couple («pure» and «impure»)? Let us take the answer from two Leviticus commentaries: «The 'holy' is anything set apart for sacred use [...]. The 'common' refers to that which is used in the normal, daily course of life»<sup>4</sup>. Examples of persons and things set apart by God and so «holy» are «his day, the Sabbath (Gen 2:3; Exod 20:10-

<sup>3</sup> When we ourselves quote texts from Sacred Scripture in English, we use the RSV.

<sup>4</sup> John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1992) 135. Henceforth, Hartley, *Leviticus*.

11), his priesthood ([Lev] 22:9), and his people ([Lev] 22:32). [...] Persons and objects are subject to four possible states: sacred, common, pure, and impure, two of which can exist simultaneously – either sacred or common and either pure or impure. Nevertheless, one combination is excluded in the priestly system: whereas the common may be either pure or impure the sacred may not be impure. [...] The sanctuary, for example, must at all times remain pure; impurity befalling it must immediately be purged [...]. The common is contiguous with the realms of the pure and impure, but the sacred is contiguous only with the pure; it may not contact the impure. [...] In particular, it is incumbent upon the priests, through their constant instruction [Lev 10:11], to enlarge the realms of the sacred and the pure by reducing the areas of the common and the impure. Israel is to be instructed by the priests how to reduce the incidence of impurity by purifying (and avoiding) it [...] and how to reduce the realm of the common by sanctifying it – for example, by faithfully observing sacred time (the Sabbath and festivals) and frequenting holy space (the sanctuary). Hence, the goal is that the categories of common and impure shall largely disappear, by the respective conversion into the sacred and pure. The priestly task is, therefore, a dynamic one. It is to make all of Israel into ‘a royalty of priests and a holy nation’ (Exod 19:6).<sup>5</sup>

The concluding words of the prophet Zechariah in Zech 14,20-21 give expression to this ritual-religious ideal: «And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to the

Lord.” And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day». The Incarnation of the eternal Son of God Jesus Christ our Lord who purifies the Temple (Matt 21,12-14) and declares all food pure (Matt 15,11parr) makes this ideal become a fact.

## 1.2 A Jewish and a Christian Presentation of Ritual Purity and Impurity

Let us compare, now, how the authoritative *Encyclopaedia Judaica* views ritual purity and impurity in the Old Testament with how a Catholic biblical scholar sees ritual purity and impurity in Sacred Scripture (OT and NT).

Ritual purity and impurity are defined as follows in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: «Purity and Impurity, Ritual [Heb. ... *tumah ve-toharah*; Greek. *akatharton kai katharon*], a concept that a person or object can be in a state which, by religious law, prevents the person or object from having any contact with the temple or its cult. The state is transferable from one object to another in a variety of ways, such as touching the object or being under one roof with it, and is independent of the actual physical condition. The state of impurity can be corrected by the performance of specified rituals, mainly including ablution, after which the person or object becomes pure once more until impurity is again contracted. [...] The Hebrew terms are also used for animals forbidden or permitted

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 616-617. Henceforth, Milgrom, *Leviticus*.



for consumption. [...] The state of impurity is considered hateful to God, and man is to take care in order not to find himself thus excluded from His divine presence (cf. Lev 11:43-47). [...] Three main causes of impurity are apparent: leprosy, issue from human sexual organs, and the dead bodies of certain animals, and particularly human corpses. [...] From other allusions in the Bible it is clear that other things were also considered impure: the uncircumcised (Isa. 52:1 etc.); countries other than Erez Israel (Josh 22:19; Hos. 9:3; Amos 7:17); and idols (Gen. 35:2; Isa. 30:22)»<sup>6</sup>

The mention of animals forbidden or permitted for consumption calls for further explanation: «The Hebrew prophets repeatedly refer to *kashrut* [«pure food»]<sup>7</sup>. Isaiah 66:17 warned that those “eating swine’s flesh and the detestable thing and the mouse, shall be consumed together”. Ezek (4:14), in his vision, claimed: “Ah, Lord God; behold my soul hath not been polluted, for from my youth up, even till now, have I not eaten of that which dieth of itself, or is torn of beasts; neither came there abhorred flesh into my mouth.” Daniel, together with his companions Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, refused to partake of the “king’s food” and of the “wine he drank” (Dan 1:8). [In Second Temple times] Jews endangered their lives by the faithful adherence to the dietary laws

6 Encyclopaedia Hebraica and Editorial Staff of Encyclopaedia Judaica, «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII, 1405-1406. Henceforth, «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII.

7 Cf. Ed., «Kasher», *EncJud* X, 806: «term originally used in the Bible in the sense of “fit” and “proper” (e.g. Esth. 8:5; Eccles. 20:10; 11:6), and later in rabbinic literature exclusively for objects that are ritually correct and faultless». The OT prophets themselves never used the term «kasher» or «kosher» in this sense, but they referred to the realities denoted by this term.

during the Syrian rule of Erez Israel, especially in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. I Maccabees (1:62-63) records, “Many of the people of Israel adhered to the law of the Lord. They would not eat unclean things, and chose rather to die.” The eating of the “unclean things” was literally equated with apostasy [...cf.] II Macc 6:18. During the same period Hannah and her seven sons chose martyrdom rather than contravene the dietary laws [...] *ibid.* 7:2. In the epic story of Judith and Holofernes, Judith affirms, “I will not eat thereof, what I have brought with will be enough for me” (Judith 12:2). The Book of Tobit states that the dietary laws were specifically designed to set the children of Israel apart from their neighbors: “All my brethren, and all that were of my kindred, did eat of the bread of the gentiles, but I kept myself from eating of the bread of the gentiles” (Tob. 1:10-11).»<sup>8</sup> In the New Testament, Saint Peter, invited by the midday vision to eat unclean food, reacts thus: «No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean» (Acts 10,14; 11,8). Clearly, eating or not eating impure food, besides having a ritual purity-impurity dimension, has also a moral dimension. Moreover, the above examples show with what earnestness this moral dimension was perceived.

Now let us see, as representative of the Christian view of ritual purity and impurity in Sacred Scripture (OT and NT), three paragraphs of the great Catholic Biblical scholar Roland de Vaux’s *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions*, Chapter 14: «Secondary Acts of the Cult», Section 2: «Rites of purification and of de-consecration».

8 Harry Rabinowicz, «Dietary Laws», *EncJud* VI, 40-41.

«In the minds of the ancients there was a close connection between the notion of ritual impurity and the notion of being consecrated to God. There was a mysterious and frightening force inherent in things which were impure and in things which were sacred, and these two forces acted on everything with which they came into contact, placing the objects or persons which touched them under a kind of interdict. Both what was impure and what was consecrated were alike 'untouchable', and any person who touched them became himself 'untouchable'. These primitive notions are found in the Old Testament: one law forbade men to touch the Ark of the Covenant, and another law forbade men to touch a corpse; a mother had to purify herself after childbirth, because it made her impure, and a priest had to change his clothes after a sacrifice, because it had made him a consecrated person. Yet this impurity is not to be understood as a defilement, and this kind of holiness is not to be understood as a moral virtue: they are rather 'states' or 'conditions' from which men must emerge in order to re-enter normal life.

The Bible described the extent of these interdicts, and the rituals for purification and de-consecration; here, perhaps, more than anywhere else, the religion of Israel preserved some very archaic customs. It is strange that these customs were integrated into the Priestly legislation, the very latest part of the Pentateuch; yet, though the rites were retained, they were given a new meaning. They served to separate Israel from the pagan world around it, and to inculcate the idea of [YHWH]'s transcendent holiness and of the holiness which his chosen people ought to preserve. Hence, in the

final synthesis of Leviticus, the Law of Purity (Lv 11-16) was put beside the Law of Holiness (Lev 17-26): they are the two aspects, negative and positive, of that holiness which is demanded by God»<sup>9</sup>.

True, the original purpose of the ritual purity system was «to give expression to the holiness of God and of his people, but it changed into a narrow system of formal observance, a yoke too heavy to be borne, what had once been a protection became an iron collar. [...] Jesus] proclaimed that the only uncleanness which brings defilement is moral uncleanness (Mt 15: 10-20), and St. Paul laid down that 'nothing is of itself unclean or impure' (Ro 14: 14)»<sup>10</sup>.

Comparing now the two above accounts of ritual purity and impurity in the Old Testament and in Sacred Scripture (OT and NT) we realize that, in the midst of many similar and even identical statements, there is one basic difference: whereas the Jewish account tends to emphasize the relatedness between ritual and moral purity-impurity while keeping the distinction between the two realms, the Christian account tends to minimize the relatedness while maximizing the difference. This leads us to our third point.

### 1.3 Relationship between Ritual Purity-Impurity and Moral Purity-Impurity

Notwithstanding the one significant difference between Roland de Vaux and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* just indicated, were we to ask

<sup>9</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions*, tr. J. McHugh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 460. Henceforth, Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*.

<sup>10</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 464.

whether ritual impurity by itself has anything to do with moral impurity (i.e. sin), both Roland de Vaux and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* would agree that it is only by disobeying a precept of God's Law that ritual impurity can become a moral transgression, that is, a sin (in the moral sense that today we normally attribute to this term).

Let us listen again to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: «The terms 'pure' and 'impure' are also applied in the Bible to serious transgressions, especially sexual, which caused the land to become impure (Lev. 18:27-28, etc.). The prophets, especially Ezekiel, stress the uncleanness caused to the land by idolatry and bloodshed, but it seems that any sin is thought of as causing impurity and expressions taken from the purity ritual passages serve figuratively in the Bible as symbols for atonement and repentance (Ezek 36:25; Ps. 51:4 et al.). The two terms of atonement and purification tend therefore to merge. The term for purification is sometimes used for holiness, but generally the difference between the two is apparent»<sup>11</sup>.

According to the Old Testament, then, ritual impurity can be caused by moral impurity and ritual purity-impurity can be used metaphorically to denote moral purity-impurity. Lev 11,43-47 is a crucial text in this regard. It is the text that *Encyclopaedia Judaica* cites in order to affirm that «the state of impurity is considered hateful to God». It is practically the only OT text that almost identifies ritual purity and moral holiness (but see also Deut 23,12-14): «You shall not make yourselves abominable with any swarming thing that swarms; and you shall not defile yourself with them, lest you

become unclean. For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls upon the earth. For I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy».

On the basis of the explanations given above, this apparent identification of ritual purity and moral holiness is to be understood like this: the appeal to God's holiness is made not to identify ritual purity and moral holiness, but to stress the fact that obedience to the ritual purity laws (as to all other laws contained in the Law of God) is part of the moral holiness by which we are imitators of God<sup>12</sup>. So, with regard to each ritual purity law, attention must be paid to what is actually commanded or forbidden and what is not. For example, regarding the dietary laws, it is forbidden to incur the impurity consequent upon eating impure animal flesh. Instead, regarding other purity laws (e.g. leprosy, sexual intercourse, etc.), it is not forbidden to contract impurity, but it is commanded that, once the impurity is incurred, it should be «monitored»<sup>13</sup> and eventually eliminated, either by the expiry of a definite period of time or by adequate ritual action, namely, the «purification offering»<sup>14</sup>. The «sin» or «guilt» of which, for example, Lev 5,2-3 speaks with regard to ritual impurity is to be understood in the ritual sense, since it deals with matters of ritual «impurity», not in the moral sense spoken by, for example, Lev 6,1-5, dealing with violations of the

11 «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII, 1406-1407.

12 Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 686-687.

13 Thus Hartley, *Leviticus*, 163.

14 This is how Hartley, *Leviticus*, 55 translates the term (Heb *hatta't* Greek *hamartia*) that is often translated as «sin offering».

Ten Commandments<sup>15</sup>.

It remains true, therefore, that to incur ritual impurity is not necessarily a sin, but often is only a change of status that may be very troublesome, but not sinful at all. So it is a misconception to think, for example, that Jesus is violating the Law when he touches the leper in Matt 8,3. In touching the leper, Jesus is only submitting himself to the trouble of becoming ritually impure, with all the consequences that this may entail (e.g. segregation, sacrificial offering, etc.; actually, as we will see, Jesus' touching lepers, corpses, and the sick does not even involve him in ritual impurity, for the reason that we will explain below).

This is confirmed by the following consideration. According to OT God's Law, not only morally faulty actions «defile», but also holy and sacred actions. Sexual relations between the spouses are «causes of impurity», not because they are morally problematic (they are not), but because of an opposite reason, because they touch upon the sacredness of life<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, holy things can «defile» the person that comes in contact with them, rendering him

15 Regarding Lev 4,1-6,7, Martin Noth, *Leviticus. A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM Press, 1965) 37 says that these texts «deal with cases in which someone has trespassed unwittingly and unintentionally against some divine commandment. [...] It is a question not of failure to observe the prescribed procedure, but rather the carrying out of forbidden procedure. Provision for the possibility of a cultic atonement always applies to something done "unwittingly" [...]; for deliberate infringement of divine commands or prohibitions there was no such possibility».

16 This transpires clearly from the comments made on the legal enactment that the consummation of the nuptial bond causes defilement for seven days (Lev 15,19-24). *The Code of Maimonides* X,V,V,9 says: «[b]oth the man and the woman who have had intercourse become unclean and both incur first-grade uncleanness, on the authority of scripture. [...]

or her «defiled» and so in need of «purification». So, for example, paradoxically, when in Matt 15,1-2 the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem ask Jesus: «Why do your disciples transgression the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat», it is possible that the hands need to be washed, not because they are dirty, but because they have been «defiled» by contact with the scrolls of the Torah during the prayer service in the synagogue. This, however, is not a view of the Old Testament itself, but only a traditional view current in Pharisaic circles during NT times and transmitted to later ages. The Pharisees and the scribes themselves, in fact, in Matt 15,1-2 do not appeal to «Law and Prophets», but only speak of «tradition of the elders».

As a matter of fact, the view that sacred things «defile» ordinary people (as distinct from the high priest and other liturgical ministers, cf. Lev 16,23-28) may be at variance with Sacred Scripture. It seemingly contradicts the judgment laid down in Hag 2,11-13: «Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests to decide this question, "If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and touches with

The woman] remains clean unless he who has intercourse with her is a man and an Israelite». R. Zimmermann, *Geschlechtermetaphorik und Gottesverhältnis. Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie eines Bildfelds in Urchristentum und antiker Umwelt*, WUNT II 122 (Tübingen: J.L.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2001) 239-240 refers to y.Ber 6c and the attempts made to forbid cohabitation on a Sabbath (b.Ket 5b; 6b; 7a). But *The Code of Maimonides*, while on the one hand stating that «[n]eedles to say, it is forbidden to marry on a Sabbath» (IV,I,XI,14; because this would break the Sabbath rest), shows that sexual intercourse is more than compatible with the Sabbath: «It is the practice of the disciples of the wise to have conjugal relations each Friday night» (IV,I,XIV,1). The above English translations of the *Code of Maimonides* are from the Yale Judaica Series edition.



his skirt bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?" The priests answered, "No." Then said Haggai, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered, "It does become unclean"». The implication of the priests' two answers is clear: «Although defilement is contagious (the answer to the second question being affirmative), holiness in contrast is not (the answer to the first question being negative). Sanctity is much more difficult to acquire and must be generated by direct involvement or behavior. Each individual becomes responsible for adherence to standards that lead towards holiness»<sup>17</sup>. This passage from the prophet Haggai shows that, at least in the case of ordinary people, «contamination» by the sacred is not understood as being a legal enactment of the Law of Moses.

This «sacred contamination» later came to be known as «Impurity of hands. The sages in a number of cases decreed impurity upon the hands of a person although he was not impure. The origin of this decree is connected with the Temple cult. The decree was meant to prevent hallowed things becoming impure [...]. It was similarly decreed that all sacred writings and tefillin with straps render hands impure [...]. The concept of impurity of hands was current in early times and indeed the *baraita* teaches: "Shammai and Hillel decreed the impurity of hands [...]"'. The Babylonian Talmud assumes the origin of impurity of hands in hallowed things to be earlier than

Hillel and Shammai [...]. Washing of hands before a meal is also referred to in Matthew (15:2) as a "tradition of the elders" [...]. It seems then that the decree of Hillel and Shammai was only on hands that had become impure, but that the pious regarded hands in general as impure even for common food (Jos[ephus], Wars, 2:129 relates that the Essenes were wont to bathe before their meal)»<sup>18</sup>.

In conclusion, we may say: ritual impurity, as such, has nothing to do with moral impurity, i.e. with sin. In fact, holy things and essential human acts like marital intercourse and giving birth can cause ritual impurity. Ritual impurity becomes a sin only if it involves the transgression of a mandate of God's Law as is the case, for example, in eating forbidden, ritually impure, food. Since ritual law demands obedience, willful non-observance of ritual purity-impurity laws is sinful and so causes moral impurity. In the case of the so-called "dietary laws" ritual purity-impurity and moral purity-impurity become identified: conscious observance or non-observance of these laws is obedience or disobedience to God. As for unwitting non-observance of these laws, even though Lev 4-7 treats them as «sin», they are not sin in today's meaning of the word «sin», i.e. a consciously voluntary moral transgression.

<sup>17</sup> Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, The Anchor Bible 25B (New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland: Doubleday, 1987) 56.

<sup>18</sup> «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII, 1409-1410. Shammai and Hillel flourished at the turn of the millennia (late 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and early 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) A vestige of this meaning of ritual «impurity» caused by contact with holy things is preserved in how we still speak of the priest «purifying» the chalice and «purifying» his hands at the end of the celebration of Holy Mass.



## 1.4 Sickness-Handicap-Death, Ritual Impurity, and

### Moral Impurity

Another point to be clarified is the connection that in Sacred Scripture often holds between the reality of sickness or handicap or death and that of ritual impurity and moral impurity (i.e. sin).

While, as we have seen, corpses cause ritual impurity, only for two kinds of sickness cause ritual impurity: what is usually called «leprosy» (Lev 13-14) and abnormal discharge from genitals (Lev 15,1-15.25-30). «The Hebrew word which modern translations render as ‘leprosy’ [...] is not – or not merely – what we nowadays term leprosy. [It] applied to different skin diseases, the symptoms of which are described in Lv 13:1-44: the symptoms are not those of what we call leprosy (*Elephantiasis Graecorum*), and the diseases described can be cured»<sup>19</sup>. Biblical leprosy «is not identical with the condition as medically diagnosed»<sup>20</sup>. Another kind of sickness is that which affects excretions from the sexual organs of a man or a woman. Lev 15 distinguishes abnormal from normal discharges. Regarding the man, abnormal discharges are dealt with in Lev 15,2-15, regarding the woman, abnormal discharges are dealt with in Lev 15,25-30. Childbirth (Lev 12), normal sexual intercourse (Lev 15,18), a man’s normal discharge (Lev 15,16-17), a woman’s regular discharge (Lev 15,19-24) also cause ritual impurity, but this does not mean that they are treated like diseases. Rather, as we have explained, it means that they are treated as phenomena and actions

<sup>19</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 462.

<sup>20</sup> «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII, 1405.

touching on the sacredness of life.

A connection (even a cause-effect connection) between moral impurity (i.e. sin) and sickness in general (including handicaps, debilitating accidents, and death) is implied in «Exod 20,5; Lev 26,14-33; Deut 28,15-68; 2Chr 21,15,18-19; Ps 103[102],3 («who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases»); Luke 13,2; John 5,14; 9,2; 1Cor 11,29-30; Jas 5,14-15; [...]»<sup>21</sup>. See also Job 18,5.13; Sir 38,9-15; John 11,4. The Q & A between Jesus’ disciples and Jesus in John 9,2-3 reveals to us the idea prevalent in NT times in this regard and Jesus’ denial of this idea: «As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him”». But is Jesus’ denial absolute? Other Gospel texts, referred to above, show that Jesus’ denial of the connection between sin and sickness is not absolute. These other texts imply that there is a relationship between sickness and sin, though it is not clear how. One example may suffice: «See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you» (John 5,14).

A connection between sickness in general (especially fever) and both ritual and moral impurity is implied by the fact that sometimes healing accounts of Sacred Scripture, including the Gospels, make

<sup>21</sup> W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, II, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 89. Henceforth, Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II. Similarly, U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20. A Commentary*, Translated by J.E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) II, 27. Henceforth, Luz, *Matthew*, II.

it «unclear whether we should think of the fever as caused by a demon and thus of the cure as an exorcism. Luke certainly seems to have been so disposed (4.39: 'he rebuked the fever'), and the connexion between demons and fever was perhaps common (cf. T. Sol. 7.5-7)»<sup>22</sup>. The «moral impurity» implication of human contact with the demoniac may not be very clear, but the «ritual impurity» implication is clear. To remain within the range of the Gospel according to Matthew, let us just compare the «unclean spirits» of Matt 10,1 (ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων ὥστε ἐκβάλλειν αὐτὰ) with the «demons» of Matt 10:8 (δαιμόνια ἐκβάλλετε), and the «demons» of Matt 12,28 (εἰ δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) with the «unclean spirit» of Matt 12,43 (Ὅταν δὲ τὸ ἀκάθαρτον πνεῦμα ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου...)

Given such ritual-moral purity-impurity implications of sickness and death, all Gospel accounts of healing the sick and raising the dead give expression to an implicit «purification concern».

## 2. Literary Structure, Purification Concern and Christological Concern of Matt 8-9

In the two following sections, we will offer, in Section Two, a bird's-eye view of Matt 8-9 from the point of view of literary structure and essential content (namely, purification concern and

Christological concern), thus identifying the position of Matt 9,14-17 in the overall literary structure of Matt 8-9. The essential content will be presented, first, in a summary way and then more in detail. In Section Three, we will concentrate on the semantic relationship of Matt 9,14-17 to its immediately preceding and following contexts in Matt 9, thus highlighting how Matthew presents Jesus' offer of radical purification through forgiveness of sins.

### 2.1 Literary Structure of Matt 8-9

Matt 8-9 belongs to the second of the three parts in which Matt can be divided (Matt 1,1-4,16; 4,17-16,20; 16,21-28,20)<sup>23</sup>. Within this second part, Matt 8-9 «is the second half of a two-panel presentation which typifies Jesus' ministry. In 5-7 Jesus speaks. In 8-9 he (for the most part) acts. It is thereby shown that God in Christ heals both by words and by mighty deeds»<sup>24</sup> in favor of his people

23 Cf. J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 1-39; D.R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, JSNT.S 31 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 73-108.

24 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 1. They refer to Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.2.6 as the earliest example of this understanding of Matt 5-9. Other titles that have been given to Matt 8-9 are: «Jesus as Servant of YHWH and Healer of the Infirm», «Jesus as Savior of Israel, Eschatological Judge, and Lord of the Church», «Jesus as Messiah in Action», «Jesus as Exorcist without Peer», etc. Cf. Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 1-5: «Excursus V: Matt 8-9». Perhaps these themes are best taken together, as Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 4-5 suggest. See also D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-3*, WBC 33A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1993) 195-196. Henceforth, Hagner, *Matthew*, I. See also Luz, *Matthew*, II, 5, but remembering that in the narrative sections Matt «tells stories and does not present themes» (Luz, *Matthew*, II, 1). The «purification concern» we are dealing with is more than a «theme», it is an overarching dimension of meaning. That is why we do not call it a «theme», but a «concern».

22 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 34-35. «T. Sol.» means the apocryphal book *Testamentum Solomonis*. See also Mark 1,31b; 9,17.25; Luke 6,18; 9,42

Israel<sup>25</sup>.

The position of Matt 9,14-17 within Matt 8-9 depends on Matt 8-9's literary structure, seemingly consisting of «ten miracles» or «three sets of three» miracle stories<sup>26</sup>. Though there are ten miracles related in this section, there are only nine miracle stories, since Matt 9,18-26 relates two miracles in one single story that forms an indissoluble narrative unity in all three Synoptics.

The nine miracle stories are grouped in trios (first trio: 8,1-4.5-13.14-15; second trio: 8,23-27; 8,28-34; 9,1-8; third trio: 9,18-26.27-31.32-34). Each of these three trios is set apart from what follows by a «transitional narrative» that does not narrate any individual miracle, but deals with other things, mentioning Jesus' healing only in passing and in general terms. The first such «transitional narrative» is Matt 8, 16-22; the second Matt 9,9-17; the third Matt 9,35-38. Besides the three trios of miracle-narratives, we have thus a fourth trio of «transitional narratives».

25 Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 6: «[Matt] wants to show how Jesus heals "within the (holy) nation" (4:23)». It is the «(holy) nation» of Israel, the people of God, that, in the first place, needs to be purified, first through Jesus' own ministry and then through the ministry of his Apostles, whom Jesus, for the time being, sends neither to the Gentiles nor to the Samaritans, but to «the lost sheep of the house of Israel» (Matt 10,6). Cf. Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 5: «Mt 5-10 depicts the mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that is, the demands made on and benefits offered to the chosen people by God in Christ».

26 Thus Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, I, 67.102. Differently, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 1-2; Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 195-196.

## 2.2 Purification Concern and Christological Concern in Matt 8-9

As a second step in this overall presentation of Matt 8-9, we present its purification and Christological concerns, first in a summary way and then more in detail.

The purification concern pervades the whole of Matt 8-9. In what follows, we will try to show that, in Matt 8-9, not only medical and nuptial metaphors used by Jesus, but also real situations that touch upon issues of ritual purity-impurity and of health-sickness-death point metaphorically to the reality of moral impurity, i.e. sin, and its purification by the forgiveness of sins offered by Jesus.

For this to become clear, we must, facilitated by the introduction given in Section One, take note of the inherent cultural sensitivity implied by what is happening and by the way things are expressed: leprosy is the ritually unclean disease par excellence (8,2-3); the Gentile house of the centurion is supposed to be ritually unclean (8,5.10); any sickness is related to moral impurity, to sin (8,5.14-15.16-17; 9,2.20.28.35); dead bodies are ritually defiling (8,22; 9,18.25); Matt 8,17 quotes Isa 53,4, a text about vicarious suffering that purifies from sin, a concern with moral purity (cf. the καθαρίσειν of Isa 53,10); the demoniacs are ritually and morally unclean (8,16.28-34; 9,32); the tombs cause ritual impurity (8,28), as do the swine (8,30-32), when their carcasses are touched or when pork is eaten.

Correlative to this concern is the thick presence in Matt 8-9

of salvific motifs implied in the salvific titles<sup>27</sup> applied to Jesus by Jesus' interlocutors: for them Jesus is Lord (8,2. 6.21.25; 9,28), Son of David (9,27), Son of God (8,29). The title «Son of God», paradoxically uttered by the demoniacs<sup>28</sup>, enjoys a central position, since it occurs in the central pericope (the fifth of the nine miracle-narratives). Jesus applies to himself the title «Son of man» (8,20; 9,6) and, implicitly, the title «father» (9,2.22). Matthew himself applies, implicitly, to Jesus the titles «Servant of the Lord» (8,17), Preacher, Teacher, and Healer (9,35). As meaningful are the metaphors that Jesus applies to himself: physician (9,12) and bridegroom (9,15). Again implicitly, Matthew applies to Jesus the metaphor of the shepherd (9,36). All these titles and metaphors are connected, directly or indirectly, with the offer of forgiveness of sins made by Jesus (explicitly only in 9,2).

Next, we present more in detail the essential content (purification concern and Christological concern) of Matt 8-9, just presented in a summary form.

### 2.2.1 The Three «Miracle Narrative» Trios

The trio of miracle-narrative trios begins paradigmatically with the healing of the leper (8,1-4), the unclean person par excellence (Lev 13-14; Num 5,2; 2Kings 7,3-10; 15,5; 2Chr 26,16-21). The

27 See Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 4. For the salvific import of these titles, see below regarding the titles Lord, Teacher, etc.

28 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 4 Note 4: «Kingsbury, however, has an explanation for this: apart from supernatural beings (God, Satan, demons), it is only by revelation that one can confess Jesus to be the Son of God (16.16-7); thus, when Jesus is in public, as in chapters 8-9, we learn only what the crowds called him».

leper calls Jesus «Lord» (Matt 8,2)<sup>29</sup>. Jesus' touch makes him clean. Jesus' touch presupposes his consciousness of a personal purity that purifies (cf. Sir 31[34],4). Jesus is not to be seen here as violating the law. There is no law that forbids touching a leper. The law only says that if you touch, or are touched by, a leper, you become ritually unclean. In the case of Jesus, however, even the latter legal enactment does not apply, since his touch imparts cleanness to the unclean and not vice versa<sup>30</sup>. «When Jesus touches the man, leprosy does not spread to the healer; rather, healing power goes forth to conquer the disease. The leprosy is rendered impotent»<sup>31</sup>. This is a fundamental sign (cf. Matt 11:5). Jesus sends the cured leper away telling him: «go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς» (8,4; cf. Lev 13,9-17.45-46; 14,1-32). This Greek phrase can be understood both negatively and positively. In the negative sense, «the point would be that if the priests do recognize the leper's recovery, then they cannot persist in

29 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 20: «what is the specific content of 'Lord' as applied precisely to Jesus? Its use by supplicants in the healing narratives and by the disciples in 8.25 and 14.28-30 connects it with Jesus' majestic ἐξουσία».

30 Thus Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 13-14. Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 198 does not see this point.

31 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 13. Here «touched him» is more important than the OT resonant «stretched out his hand» (cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 6; *Ibidem*, 5 note 8, U. Luz refers to rabbis saying that to cure leprosy «is as difficult as is raising a person from the dead»). «Neither Moses (Num 12.9-15) nor Elisha (2 Kgs 5.1-14) touched the leper he healed» (Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 13 Note 16). Paul's slogan-like sentence in Tit 1,15 (πάντα καθάρᾳ τοῖς καθαρῶς) is used in the Latin (*Omnia munda mundis*) by Padre Cristoforo in Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, VIII, to ensure the safety of two young betrothed on the night of their aborted wedding.



unbelief without incriminating themselves»<sup>32</sup>. In the positive sense, three paraphrases are possible: 1) «a testimony to them that I uphold the Torah»; 2) «a testimony to them that the outcast has been made whole»; 3) «a testimony to them that I have done this great work»<sup>33</sup>. In line with these positive meanings, we could paraphrase thus: «a testimony to them (the priests, and, through the priests, the people as a whole) that I can make the unclean clean and so that I am bringing the Torah purification concern to fulfillment». This leper story is the first, but not the only one, to raise the purification issue in Matt 8. With its threefold repetition of purification vocabulary (8,2-3), this story functions like an overture for Matt 8-9.

The next miracle-narrative (Matt 8,5-13) is about the cure of the centurion's servant (or son, cf. John 4,46-54)<sup>34</sup>. In this narrative, the perception of the purification concern (the house of a Gentile is impure, cf. Matt 10:5; Luke 7,3-5; Acts 10,28; Gal 2,12)<sup>35</sup> makes us see that Jesus' first response to the centurion is better understood as a question rather than an affirmation, the Greek original (Ἐγὼ ἐλθὼν θεραπεύσω αὐτόν) being open to both possibilities and with the expressed, and so emphatic, ἐγὼ inclining us to the question possibility. So, not: «I will come and heal him», but: «Will I come and heal him?! (Ἐγὼ ἐλθὼν θεραπεύσω αὐτόν;)». Entrance into a

Gentile residence was taboo for the Jews of Jesus' times (John 18,28; Acts 10,28; 11,12; cf. Matt 10,6; 15,24; John 4,48)<sup>36</sup>. Of course, it is possible that Jesus intended to purify the centurion's home by his own coming. «The presence of Jesus made space sacred, and during his earthly ministry he chose to bless houses with his presence»<sup>37</sup>. This cannot be excluded, even if it would seem that Jesus waited for his «hour» to arrive before bestowing purity and forgiveness of sins on the Gentiles (cf. John 12,23-32).

The third miracle-narrative of the first trio is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8,14-15). The way Matthew expresses the cure (καὶ ἀφῆκεν αὐτὴν ὁ πυρετός) hints at the connection between fever and an unclean spirit (demon, cf. Luke 4,39)<sup>38</sup>, thus raising the purification issue.

The first miracle-narrative of the second trio is Jesus' stilling the storm (Matt 8,23-27). Here the purification concern comes in through the realization that «the sea and its storms can symbolize chaos or the world and its difficulties (Ps 65[64].5; 69[68].1-2; Isa 43.2; 57.20; Dan 7.2-3; cf. Rev 13.1)»<sup>39</sup>. That is why, when describing the new heaven and the new earth, besides saying that «the first heaven and the first earth had passed away», John feels the need to say clearly that «the sea was no more» (Rev 21,1). Jesus' capacity to still the storm shows that he can heal not only humanity,

32 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 16.

33 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 16. The second meaning is specified by Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 199 to mean «for "them", i.e. the people (thus RSV: "for a proof to the people")». Luz, *Matthew*, II, 8 combines the first and the second meaning.

34 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 2-21 opts for «servant»; Luz, *Matthew*, II, 10 note 17 opts for «son». Παῖς can mean both.

35 See Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 22.

36 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 22; Luz, *Matthew*, II, 10: «Jesus' answer, an astonished question, rejects the request, since as a Jew he cannot enter a Gentile's house.»

37 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 34.

38 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 35.

39 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 68; similarly, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 20.



but also Mother Nature.

The second miracle-narrative of the second trio (Jesus' healing of the two demoniacs, Matt 8,28-34) continues (Matt 8,32) the motif of the sea as the natural habitat of evil, explaining why the demons choose to enter the swine and drive them to be drowned in the sea: the sea, as the standard metaphor of evil, is the natural habitat of demons. «Jesus is sending the demons back to whence they came, back to the watery chaos (cf. 8.23-7). He is restoring order on the land»<sup>40</sup>. The primary element of impurity, of course, is the demons themselves, who, as we have seen, are impure by definition (Matt 10,1; 12,43; Mark 5,2). This pericope is the first detailed narrative of an exorcism in Matt (after the summary statement of Matt 8,16). Besides the sea and the demons, the whole narrative is dotted with data that raise the purification concern: the mainly Gentile «country of the Gerasenes» (8,28)<sup>41</sup>, the tombs (8,28; cf. Matt 23,25 MS  $\Sigma$  lat sy<sup>s</sup> co; 23,27; Isa 65,4a)<sup>42</sup>, the swine (8,30; cf. Matt 7,6; Luke 15,15-16; Lev 11,7; Deut 14,8a; Isa 65,4b; 66,3.17; 2Macc 6,18-31; Acts 10,10-15)<sup>43</sup>, and the dead carcasses of the swine drowned in the sea (8,32; cf. Lev 11,8; Deut 14,8b).

The third miracle-narrative of the second trio is Jesus' healing of a man sick with palsy (Matt 9,1-8). Here Jesus meets the man

with the declaration: «Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven» (9,2). The «purification» concern is here raised by the connection holding between sickness and the moral impurity of sin. «Are we to imagine that a miraculous healing could not take place without the forgiveness of sins, and that forgiveness of sins necessarily entails healing? If so, when Jesus forgives the man's sins, he is not treating a symptom but rooting out the symptom's cause; and the paralytic's ability to walk proves that he has been forgiven (cf. Ps 147.3). [...] The forgiveness of sins is a prominent theme in the First Gospel. In 1.21 Jesus' ministry is summed up as a saving of his people from their sins. And in 26.28 (diff. Mark and Luke) Jesus' death is plainly stated to be "for the forgiveness of sins (cf. 20.28)"»<sup>44</sup>.

The first miracle-narrative of the third trio is the compound miracle of Jesus' healing a woman with a hemorrhage and resurrecting a ruler's daughter (Matt 9,18-26). The request of the ruler puts Jesus before the challenge of ritual impurity for a whole week, since corpses are one of the main sources of ritual impurity (Num 19,11-13): «My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live» (Matt 9,18). The woman with a hemorrhage is in a state of ritual impurity (Lev 15,25.33) that she will transmit, for a whole day, to anyone she will touch (cf. Lev 15,19.25b). This made such a woman unwelcome in her own environment (cf. Ezek 36,17). The fact that her uncleanness (like

40 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 84.

41 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 82-83.

42 Tombs, because of the corpses they contain (cf. Num 19,11-13), are also impure by definition.

43 Luz, *Matthew*, II, 24: «[...] pigs [...] were all the more taboo for the Jews because they were an important sacrificial animal in most Hellenistic cults».

44 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 89; similarly, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 27-29: «Sin separates the people from God; it also is the cause of sickness. By dealing with the forgiveness of sins this story becomes transparent». Quotation on p. 27.

that of touching a corpse) is not mentioned by Matthew is not surprising. The writer supposes the reader understands this without the need of prompting. The woman «came up from behind him» (Matt 9,20) because, being impure, she had to touch Jesus «without anyone observing»<sup>45</sup>. As for the dead daughter of the ruler, Jesus «went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose» (Matt 9,25). As in the case of the cure of the leper, Jesus does not violate any ritual purity law. Moreover, when Jesus touches the girl, it is not the impurity of the corpse that spreads to Jesus, but it is Jesus' hidden glorious life (cf. Matt 17,2; John 14,6) that brings back the body of the girl to life. «'Jesus is the one who conquers death' [...], so the resurrection story points to Christ's all-encompassing power to give life – a power that transcends the one-time event of the miracle»<sup>46</sup>. Resurrection of the dead will be the final purification, because death, intimately linked to sin's moral impurity, is the fundamental source of ritual impurity. «God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living» (Wis 1,13), «but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it» (Wis 2,24). «The sting of death is sin» (1Cor 15,56) and «sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned» (Rom 5,12). «The last enemy to be destroyed is death» (1Cor 15,26) and so the resurrection of the dead, «in the new world» (ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, Matt 19,28), is the final «purification». This final purification is initiated by the arrival on earth of purity incarnate,

Jesus Christ. To usher in Jesus' first announcement of the Gospel, Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah: «the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned» (Matt 4,16).

The second miracle-narrative of the last trio is Jesus' healing of two blind men (Matt 9,27-31). «Given the close connection between sin and sickness in Jewish tradition, it is no surprise to learn that blindness was often regarded as a punishment for wrong-doing» (Gen 19,11; Exod 4,11; Deut 28,28-9; 2 Kgs 6,18; [...]; Mt 12,22; Jn 9,2; Acts 13,11; [...]). Moreover, Lev 21,20 prohibits a man with defective sight from joining the priesthood; and in 11QTemple 45.12-14 we read, concerning Jerusalem: 'No blind people may enter it all their days lest they defile the city in whose midst I dwell' (cf. 2 Sam 5,8; 1QSa 2,3-11; 1QM7,4-5). Clearly blindness for an ancient Jew could involve not simply poverty and hardship (cf. Judg 16,21; Mk 10,46; [...]) but also religious alienation. [One should keep in mind that blind animals were also unacceptable to (YHWH); cf. Lev 22,22; Deut 15,21; Mal 1,8]. Thus for those who composed the Dead Sea Scrolls, physical disabilities had serious spiritual consequences [...]. Some humanitarian provisions for the blind were, however, made by the Torah. Lev 19,14 prohibits putting a stumbling block before the blind, and Deut 27,18 curses those who mislead a blind man 'on the road' (cf. Job 29,15; [...]). Jesus' ministry to the blind is to be interpreted in part as an extension of such humanitarian concern. At the same time, Matthew, as probably Jesus before him, will have seen in cures of the blind the fulfillment of the eschatological expectation of Isa 35,5: 'the blind shall receive

<sup>45</sup> Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Luz, *Matthew*, II, 44-45.

their sight' (cf. Isa 29.18; 42.7,16; [...])»<sup>47</sup>.

The last miracle-narrative of the last trio is Jesus' healing of a dumb demoniac who is deaf and/or dumb (Matt 9,32-34). «Blindness and muteness appear together in the tradition [Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:18-19; 43:8] and in Matthew (12:22; 15:30-31)»<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, what has been said above regarding the cure of the two blind men, can, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied here. At the end of the trio of miracle-narrative trios, the purity-impurity concern is highlighted in two ways. Firstly, the dumb man is called a «demoniac» and his cure is expressed thus: «when the demon had been cast out». Demons, as we have seen above, are unclean spirit par excellence. Secondly, crowds and Pharisees have a contradictory conclusive reaction to this miracle and to all the miracles that precede it: «and the crowds marveled, saying, 'Never was anything like this seen in Israel.' But the Pharisees said, 'He casts out demons by the prince of demons'» (Matt 9, 33b-34). The exclamation of the crowds implicitly shows that they see God at work in what Jesus is doing (cf. 1Sam 17,46; 2Kings 1:3; Matt 12,28). The retort of the Pharisees, which will be repeated in 12,24, radically accuses Jesus of impurity, since, as just mentioned, demons are by definition «unclean spirits».

### 2.2.2 The «Transitional Narrative» Trio

As we have seen, the three «transitional narratives» in Matt

47 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 134-135 (the sentence in square brackets is given in note 41). In note 40, Davies-Allison wisely note: «But it was also plainly understood that blindness could also be the natural result of becoming old; cf. Gen 27.1 and 1 Kgs 14.4».

48 Luz, *Matthew*, II, 50. The scriptural references in square brackets are given in note 8.

8-9 are Matt 8, 16-22; Matt 9,9-17; and Matt 9,35-38. The nuptial pericope of Matt 9,14-17 is part of the second transitional narrative that comes after the 6<sup>th</sup> miracle-narrative. Thus, it does not seem to have in the overall structure of Matt 8-9 the centrality it enjoys in the chiasmic structure of Mark's Galilee Controversies Collection (2,1-3,6)<sup>49</sup>. If we suppose that Matt 8-9 is also chiasmically structured, the central position is occupied in Matt 8-9 by the miracle-narrative of the cure of the two Gadarene demoniacs (Matt 8,28-34) and their cry: «What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?» (Matt 8:29). Since, however, Matt 9,14-17 is part of the second, and so central, transitional narrative, in the set up of the transitional narratives it shares a central position together with the preceding Matt 9,9-13 (the other building block of this transitional narrative).

The three transitional narratives have a similar literary construction: they are all composed (though not in the same way) of three basic literary elements, namely: 1. narrative part, 2. reference to prophecy, and 3. Jesus' pronouncement (each pronouncement has also implicit references to prophecy).

The first transitional narrative speaks in summary form of Jesus' exorcisms and healings in Capernaum, of Jesus' attempt to ward off the crowds by going orders to go over the other side of the lake, and of the initiatives of two would-be followers of Jesus with Jesus' response to them (Matt 8,18-19.21). The second speaks of Jesus

49 Cf. J. Dewey, «The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1-3:6», in W. Telford, ed., *The Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press – London: SPCK, 1985) 109-118.

calling the tax-collector Matthew, dining with tax-collectors and sinners (thus arousing the dissent of some Pharisees), and replying to a query of the disciples of John the Baptist regarding fasting and non-fasting (Matt 9,9-11.14). The third transitional narrative speaks of Jesus who teaches, preaches, and heals in the synagogues, having compassion for the crowds, and encouraging the disciples to pray (Matt 9,35-37a).

The second element of the three transitional narratives is the reference to prophecy. In the first, Isa 53,4 is quoted by Matthew: «He took our infirmities and bore out diseases» (Matt 8,17). In the second, Hos 6,6 is quoted by Jesus himself: «I desire mercy, and not sacrifice» (Matt 9,13). In the third, Zech 10,2 (and other OT passages) are hinted at by Matthew who describes the crowds as being «like sheep without a shepherd».

The third element of the transitional narratives is Jesus' pronouncements. In the first, Jesus challenges his would-be followers with the prospect of total renunciation (Matt 8,20,22). In the second, Jesus presents himself as the physician of sinful humanity (Matt 9,12-13) and as the Messianic Bridegroom who is present and who will depart, turning human nature into a new creation (Matt 9,15-17). In the third transitional narrative, Jesus calls for prayer to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest (Matt 9,37-38).

The content of the three «transitional narratives» includes, literally or figuratively, motifs that are common to all three pericopes and motifs that are peculiar to each one. Common motifs are healing<sup>50</sup>,

crowding<sup>51</sup>, following (ἀκολουθεῖν)<sup>52</sup>, discipleship, and prophecy. Besides the specific content of the prophetic references quoted above, motifs that are peculiar to only one transitional narrative are the following: exorcism is present only in the first pericope; the central transitional narrative is characterized by calling (expressed in action in 9,9b, in words in 9,13b), mourning and fasting, and old-new; the motifs of Jesus' teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the Reign, feeling compassion, and asking for prayer are proper to the third transitional narrative.

### 2.2.3 Purification Concern in the Trio of Transitional Narratives

When giving the bird's-eye view of the purification concern in Matt 8-9 we did not take into consideration the more subtle hints at purification present in the three transitional narratives. The explication of this implicit purification concern is what we are going to do now. It is present in the first transitional narrative through Jesus' astonishing challenge to the second would-be follower: «leave the dead to bury their own dead» (Matt 8,22). For reasons of ritual purity, «Lev 21.11 forbids the high priest to bury his parents

50 The «healing» motif is implicit in the second pericope through the image of the physician.

51 The «crowding» motif appears in the first and third pericopes through the word «crowds», in the second through the «many tax collectors and sinners» who came (πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες) (9,10).

52 The motif of «following» appears in 9,35's variant reading of  $\kappa^* L f^{13}$  a b h g<sup>1</sup> etc. Without this variant, Jesus still speaks metaphorically of discipleship, no more in terms of following, but in terms of being «sent out» into «harvest labor» (9,37-38=Luke 10,2) thus introducing the next section (Matt 10,1-6).



and Num 6.6 issues the same prohibition for the Nazirites»<sup>53</sup>. More detailed legal requirements with regard to contact with corpses are set down in Num 19,11-22. Num 19,11 says: «He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days». Does Jesus' refusal to grant the would-be follower's petition have anything to do with ritual purity concerns? Is he applying priestly (even high-priestly) and Nazirite standards to ordinary Israelites, as he appears to be doing in Matt 12,3-6?

The purification concern in the second transitional narrative emerges in the objection raised with Jesus' disciples by the Pharisees regarding Jesus' table-sharing with tax collectors and sinners: «Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?» (Matt 9,11). Purification concerns are implicitly present also in the mention in Matt 9,14-17 of fasting, «bridegroom», mourning, departing (this is the meaning of ἀπαρθῆναι in Matt 9,15b)<sup>54</sup>, and the contrast between new and old clothes.

The purification concern in the third transitional narrative comes in not only with Jesus «healing every disease and every infirmity» (Matt 9,35), but also with the crowds «harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd» (Matt 9,36). The latter purification concern can be appreciated better if the great prophecy of Ezek 34 against the evil shepherds who are no shepherds at all is

53 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 58. However, Ezek 44,25-26 clarifies the prohibition issued to the high priest as not applying to priests in general: «[The priests] shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person; however, for father or mother, for son or daughter, for brother or unmarried sister they may defile themselves. After he is defiled, he shall count for himself seven days, and then he shall be clean».

54 See Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 109-118. «Departing» is, of course, Jesus' preferred idiom to hint at his death.

taken as its OT background: «The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them» (Ezek 34,4-6).

## 2.2.4/A Closer Look at the Central Transitional Narrative (Matt 9,9-17)

After the quick look at the purification concern in all three transitional narratives, let us return to the central one (Matt 9,9-17parr), of which the nuptial pericope of Matt 9,14-17 is the culminating part, to consider it more in detail.

The second (central) transitional narrative (Matt 9,9-17parr) first touches the «following» motif with Jesus' call of Matthew (ἀκολουθεῖ μοι, 9,9aparr) and the latter's prompt response (ἠκολούθησεν [Luke: ἠκολούθει], 9,9bparr); then, the μαθηταί (9,10=Mark 15; 9,11parr) are questioned by the Pharisees about Jesus' table-sharing with sinners; Jesus in his reply speaks of healing (οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες, 9,12parr), quoting Hos 6,6, and utters an ἦλθον saying<sup>55</sup> (9,13-14parr [Luke: ἐλήλυθα]); finally,

55 Cf. Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 105-106; J. Nolland, *Luke*, I, WBC 35A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1989) 243. See also W. GRIMM, *Weil Ich dich liebe. Die Verkündigung Jesu und Deuteriojesaja*, Arbeiten zum Neuen Testament und Judentum 1 (Bern: Herbert Lang – Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1976) 83-87.



in reply to the Baptist's disciples' fasting and non-fasting question (9,14parr), Jesus refers to the prophets' nuptial-mourning images (9,15-17parr). Healings<sup>56</sup>, fasts<sup>57</sup>, nuptials<sup>58</sup>, all are connected by the purification concern. Wedding is newness and beauty, and so purity par excellence<sup>59</sup>. Garments are important items in the purity legislation of Israel (Lev 13,47-59) as are containers in the practice of Israel in Jesus' times (Matt 23,25-26=Luke 11,39; cf. Mark 7,3). Going through Matt 8-9 with an eye to the «purification» implications we may obtain useful illustrations of this aspect of Jesus' nuptial newness parables.

56 As we have seen above, Sir 38,9-15's discourse about sickness implies that disease is caused by sin and so causes impurity. In popular estimation, this sickness-causing sin may be personal or inherited (cf. John 9,1-13). We have also seen that sickness is impure because it is seen as due to the presence of an unclean spirit (cf. Luke 4,39).

57 Fasts in Israel are essentially expressions of mourning, the standard way used by Israel to face the radical life purification challenge posed by sin and death. See Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 360-375.382-384.

58 «Purity and Impurity, Ritual», *EncJud* XIII, 1406.1413. «ordinary cohabitation renders both the man and the woman impure until evening. [...] In Erez Israel the common people – among them even transgressors – both men and women, were strict about bathing after cohabitation».

59 Cf. the equivalence between ἐγκαίνισεν and καθάρισεν in 1Macc 4,36; between ἐγκαίνισμός and καθαρισμός in 2Macc 2,19; between καρδίαν καθαρὰν κτίσων and πνεῦμα εὐθὲς ἐγκαίνισον in Ps 51[50],12. The verb ἐγκαίνισεν is defined as «1. to bring into existence as new [...] 2. to inaugurate the use of» by T. Muradka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain – Paris – Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2009) 186; J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, I (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992) 126 adds: «to consecrate». This verb is used for the inauguration (consecration) of the House of the Lord in 1Kings 8,63, of the Sanctuary in 1Macc 4,36.54. It is used for dwelling for the first time in a new house in Deut 20,5, in parallel with the enjoyment of the fruit of a newly-planted vineyard (Deut 20,6) and with the nuptial consummation of marriage (Deut 20,7).

The function of the central transitional narrative with respect to the other two could perhaps be expressed thus: the radicalism of the demands of the first (Matt 8,16-22) is justified by the fundamental novelty expressed in the second (9,9-17), this novelty being in its turn accounted for by the «shepherdlessness» of Israel's sheep in the third (9,35-38). This last transitional narrative, in fact, introduces the scriptural motif of «sheep without a shepherd»<sup>60</sup> (9,36=Mark 6,34; cf. Zech 10,2), a motif equivalent to that of the «lost sheep» (Matt 10,6; 15,24; Ezek 34, 4.16)<sup>61</sup>, and that of the «scattered sheep» (Matt 26,31, where Jesus himself quotes Zech 13,7; cf. Ezek 34,4-6.12.16).

To summarize the Matt 8-9 context of Jesus' nuptial parable and nuptial sayings in Matt 9,14-17, we could say that Jesus' healings and other miracles, in the light of prophecy, point to the presence of something *radically new*, the new and eternal nuptials announced by the prophets and bestowing on humanity forgiveness of sins, the needed medicine for humanity's *radical sickness* unto death, a radical nuptial newness that demands a form of discipleship

60 The direct reference is to Num 27,17; Jdt 11,19; 2Chr 18,16. See also Ezek 34,5; 1Kings 22,17. The theme shepherd-sheep, however, is also characteristic of Jeremiah (Jer 23), Ezekiel (Ezek 34), Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40,11), and Zechariah (10-11.13). The shepherd-sheep image can have spousal nuances, as in Cant 1,7-8; 2,1-2.16; 6,3.

61 This motif, that corresponds to that of «shepherdlessness», appears in the OT e.g. in Ps 119[118], 176; Jer 50,6[27,6]; Ezek 34,4.16. Cf. also the motif of «lostness» in general (e.g. Wis 12,12; Isa 46,12-13; 53,6). The «lost» motif appears in the NT also in Matt 18,11 MS D; in Luke 15,4.6.24.32; 19,10; 1Tim 1,15. Cf. also some of the earliest Christian literature outside the NT: Barn 5,9; 2Clem 2; Justin, 1Apol, 15,8.

consisting in *radical «following»*, and so «being with» Jesus the Bridegroom, who «is with» the children of the bride chamber as the source of their purification from sin.

### 3. Matt 9,14-17 in the Context of Matt 9

Matt 9 begins with two pericopes (9,1-8; 9,9-13) that, together with Matt 9,14-17, form a «locked» Synoptic trio, i.e. in all three Synoptics the three pericopes are reproduced one after the other in exactly the same order. Like 9,14-17, the two preceding pericopes are marked by the frequent presence of the name of Jesus (9,2parr; 9,4parr; 9,9.10; 9,15parr). Among the Gospels, the frequent use of the name of Jesus is characteristic of Matt (150) and John (237). In Matt, it is characteristic of chapter 9 (12 times, in a not particularly long chapter), which is surpassed only by the two chapters of the Passion Narrative (Matt 26-27)<sup>62</sup>. The frequency of the name of Jesus may be a sign that the narratives focus on the person of Jesus<sup>63</sup>.

There is a double narrative movement going through these three pericopes: first, a crescendo in the degree of directness with which the interlocutors react to Jesus' behavior, a directness which is not necessarily polemical, since it may be due to the increasing degree of familiarity (scribes, Pharisees, disciples of John the Baptist); second, a diminuendo in the aggressiveness of the content of their

<sup>62</sup> Other statistics of the occurrence of the holy name of Jesus are as follow: NT 905, Mark 81, Luke 89, Acts 68, Paul 213, Heb 13, Catholic Letters 40, Rev 14.

<sup>63</sup> See Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, III, 711: for Matthew «revelation and salvation were embodied in a person».

reactions<sup>64</sup>.

### 3.1 Matt 9,14-17's Preceding Context in Matt 9

We shall divide our analysis of Matt 9 into analysis of the preceding context (9,1-13) and of the following context (9,18-38). The preceding context is made up of two pericopes: Matt 9,1-8 and Matt 9,10-13. The Christological concern highly represented by the holy name of Jesus is thickly present in these two pericopes (9,2.4.9.10.15), supported by the titles «Son of man» (9,6) and «Teacher» (9,11).

#### 3.1.1 Matt 9,1-8parr

Matt 9,1 sets for the whole chapter, and so also for Matt 9,14-17, the time-space coordinates of all that is said and done by Jesus: «And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city».

The time in which all the episodes of Matt 9,1-34 take place

<sup>64</sup> The crescendo was noted as polemical by Alfred Loisy. See M.-J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu*, Huitième Édition (Paris: Gabalda, 1948) 46-47. See also Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 108. Matt 14,12 is a sign of the Baptist's disciples' closeness to Jesus. As Matt 23 shows, Jesus does not in principle question the Pharisees' teaching (23,2-3). Several sayings in *Pirke Aboth* are very close to Jesus' teaching, e.g. Av 2,10.12-13.15; 3,3.8.13-14.20.22; 4,2.26-27; 5,22-23; 6,1.6). It is precisely this closeness that explains (in fact, *corruptio optimi pessima*) the vehemence of Jesus' criticism of devious doctrines in Pharisaism as reported, e.g. in Matt 23. Matt's description of the Pharisees is nuanced. For example, unlike John 18,3 and like Mark-Luke, in Matt the Pharisees are absent from Jesus' passion, showing up only after his death (Matt 27,62). Cf. B. Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew. Their Redaction, Form und [sic] Relevance for the Relationship Between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism*, FRLANT 189 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 341-342.

does not need, narratively, be more than one single day: the day of the cure of the paralytic and of the call of Μαθθαῖος ὁ τελώνης (10,3) is also a day of «forgiveness of sins», of «calling and following», of «mercy, rather than sacrifice», of «feasting with and for the bridegroom, not of mourning», of «healing, rising from the dead, eye-opening, and speaking», and, finally, of «wonder and slander».

The geographical setting is Jesus' «own town» (9,1b: καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν πόλιν)<sup>65</sup>. Surprisingly, Jesus' «own town» is Capernaum, not Nazareth. This is so, beginning with Matt 4,13, when Jesus leaves Ναζαρά (Matt 4,13 and Luke 4,16, elsewhere Ναζαρέτ or Ναζαρέθ, in variant readings also Ναζαράτ and Ναζαράθ). Though Matt calls Capernaum Jesus' «own town», Jesus continues to be called by people «the Nazarene», i.e. the one «from Nazareth of Galilee» (21,11; cf. 2,23; 26,71). This is also how we call Jesus in the title of our article, «Jesus of Nazareth». «The Nazarene» is regularly rendered in Greek with Ναζωραῖος by Matt (2,23; 26,71), with Ναζαρηνός by Mark, and with any one of the two forms by Luke<sup>66</sup>. Nazareth is mentioned neither in the OT nor

in Josephus nor in the Talmud nor in the Midrash. Insofar, for a Jew it is a place despised, if not forgotten, by men: «Can anything good come out of Nazareth?» (John 1,46). Jesus' work of purification is achieved at the price of detachment from his hometown Nazareth, but retaining the lowly station connected with it.

In Matt 9,2-8, the paralytic has his sins declared forgiven and his paralysis cured by Jesus (9,2-8). Matt 9,2-8 presents for the first time in Matt the apocalyptic-eschatological salvific category of the Son of man's purifying ἐξουσία (9,6a: ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, cf. 9,8). This ἐξουσία of the present Son of man bespeaks radical newness, as the reaction of some of the scribes underlines. In the Gospel according to Matthew, this is the third time that the ἐξουσία motif appears. The first two times (Matt 7,29; 8,9), it emerges linked to Jesus' teaching in Matt 7,29 and, more indirectly, to Jesus' miracles in Matt 8,9. In Matt 10,1 it turns up again, as here, in the context of purification, a motif that is present also in all other occurrences (21,23.24.27: Cleansing of the Temple, Baptism of John; 28,18: Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit).

This glorious and lowly Son of man's purifying ἐξουσία category is the key for understanding all that is narrated at the right depth. It is thanks to this ἐξουσία that in this pericope, for the first and only time in Matt-Mark (Luke again in 7,47.48; cf. John 20,23),

65 The varied Greek transcriptions may all derive from the original Semitic form of the name, possibly נְזִרִי. See F. Zorell, *Lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1961) – Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990) 863; also W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) 664.

66 Matt's form «associates the title with the name of Jesus' hometown Nazareth [...]. But Matthew almost certainly means more than this. [...] The most likely play on words in Matthew's mind is in the similarity between the Hebrew word for "branch", נֶזֶר, and Nazareth. This view [...] traces Matthew's "quotation" back to Isa 11:1 [...] which in turn should be

related to the quotation of Isa 7:14 in Mt 1:23. The messianic figure of Isa 11:1 is the Emmanuel of Isa 7:14» (Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 40-41). Christians are called οἱ Ναζωραῖοι in Acts 24,5.

there resounds explicitly<sup>67</sup> the radically-good news of purification from sin bestowed upon a concrete individual: Θάρσει, τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι (9,2parr; cf. 9,5.6 parallels). In faith, humanity must accept the fact that God has chosen to purify his people through the Son of man's merciful self-abasement (9,6). Before Matt 9,6, the phrase «Son of man» has already appeared, just once, but in a self-abasement context (8,20). The lowliness of this phrase emerges again in Matt 9,8, where Jesus is a human being among human beings<sup>68</sup>. Only self-abasing acceptance in faith of this high paradox (power of God revealed in lowliness) can receive forgiveness of sins: «when Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic...» (9,2; cf. 10,32-33). It is faith in God through Jesus that purifies (Acts 15,9; 26,18).

### 3.1.2 Matt 9,9-13parr

Matt 9,9-13parr (the call of Matthew and the table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners) is a pericope that can easily form a narrative continuum with 9,14-17parr thanks to the increased intensity of points of contact and contrast. The discipleship motif of 9,14 (οἱ μαθηταὶ Ἰωάννου, οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ σου) is carried over from 9,9-13 (9,10: τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, 9,11: τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, 9,13: πορευθέντες δὲ μαθετε; the motif is implicit in the

ἀκολουθεῖ μοι and the ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ of 9,9). The 1<sup>st</sup>-person pronoun ἡμεῖς of 9,14 is in contrast with the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person pronoun ὑμῶν of 9,11. The οἱ Φαρισαῖοι of 9,14 are already present in 9,11. The νηστεύομεν of 9,14 is the opposite of αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου and συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ (9,10) as well as of ἐσθίει (9,11). The latter elements are in agreement with the οὐ νηστεύουσιν of 9,14 and the non-πενθεῖν of 9,15a, while the former agrees with the καὶ τότε νηστεύουσιν of 9,15b. To the ἦλθον καλέσαι of 9,13parr there corresponds the «is with them» and the «departs» of 9,15parr. Jesus' «with»-language of 9,15 (μετ' αὐτῶν) is preceded by the Pharisees' «with»-language referred to Jesus in 9,11 (μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν). Small wonder Matt 9,9-17 is treated as a unit by the system of κεφάλαια used by the MS tradition to divide the Gospels into manageable units, the whole of Matt 9,9-17 being entitled either περι ματθαίου or περι λευι του τελωνου.

In Matt 9,9-13 Jesus takes as much initiative in calling people and in table sharing<sup>69</sup> as the bridegroom does in determining the children of the bride chamber's non-fasting and fasting. Jesus' taking the initiative is a feature of the preceding pericope, too: uncalled for, he takes the initiative to forgive sins (9,2). In the same vein, sovereignly, he calls Matthew to follow him (9,9). Matthew's following after Jesus means the beginning a completely new life (from καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον το ἀναστάς ἠκολούθησεν). Jesus' subsequent table sharing «with tax collectors and sinners» is seen by Jesus himself as a physician-like activity that cures (and so

<sup>67</sup> Implicitly, this good news resounds also in the «Your faith has saved you» of 9,22, since physical healing is the sign of interior purification through forgiveness of sins.

<sup>68</sup> This understanding is not excluded but included in the usual «glorious» understanding: the Son of man's glory is revealed in lowliness. Luz, *Matthew*, II,18 would seem to disagree, but giving expression precisely to this inclusiveness on page 19.

<sup>69</sup> This initiative is stressed by Luz, *Matthew*, II, 31.



purifies) those sickly with sin (9,10-13parr).

Jesus' ὁ νυμφίος in 9,15parr is the symbolical twin of Jesus' ἱατρός in 9,13parr<sup>70</sup>, both functioning like the counterpart of the literal ὁ διδάσκαλος of 9,11 spoken by the Pharisees. «“Teacher” is the designation for Christ used by outsiders»<sup>71</sup>. Jesus as physician and bridegroom appears to be more than a teacher, though, of course, he is also a teacher, even the only teacher (23,8; cf. 10,24-25=Luke 6,40=John 13,16 and Matt 7,28parr; 22,33). In Matt, the term διδάσκαλος is never on the lips of the disciples in direct address to Jesus (cf. the negative διδασκαλία in 15,9=Mark 7,7 and διδαχή in 16,12). This term is placed in the disciples' mouth by Jesus in 26,18parr and is used by potential disciples in 8,19 and 19,16. Otherwise it is people unrelated to Jesus who call Jesus διδάσκαλος (12,38; 17,24; 22,16.24.36). For followers of Jesus, the normal direct address to Jesus is κύριε, Lord, whether for actual disciples (Matt 14,28.30; 16,22; 17,4; 18,21; 26,22; cf. 7,21.22; 25,11) or for not-yet-disciples (Matt 8,2.6.8.25; 9,28; 15,22.25.27; 17,15; 20,30.31.33). In Matt this term is otherwise used in parabolic direct address by a son to his father (Matt 21,30), by a servant or slave to his master (13,27; 25,20.22.24), by a subject to his or her king (25,37.44; cf. 27,63). In Matt, only Jesus addresses God with this

70 Healing (both physical and spiritual) is a divine activity in the OT: Gen 20,17; Ex 15,26; Num 12,13; Deut 32,39; 2Kings 20,5.8; 2Chr 7,14; 30,20; Tob 5,10; 12,14; Job 5,18; Ps 6,2; 30[29],2; 41[40],3-4; 103[102],3; 107[106],20; 147,3; Wis 16,10.12; Sir 38,9; Isa 19,22; 30,26; 57,18-19; Jer 3,22; 17,14; 30,17; 33,6; Ezek 47,12; Hos 6,1; 7,1; 11,3; 14,4; Mal 4,2[3,20]; cf. Matt 13,15; John 12,40; Acts 28,27. In Jub 23,30 Israel's physician is God. Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 134.

71 Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33.

title, used in apposition to «Father» and in the form «Lord of heaven and earth» (11,25)<sup>72</sup>.

The mournful and hopeful character of the «physician» image applied to God is well expressed by Ps 103[102],2-4a: «Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit» and by Mal 3,19-20a[4,1-2a]: «For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. [...] But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings»<sup>73</sup>. This is in sharp contrast with the joyful nuptial image of the «bridegroom», but the «physician» image anticipates Jesus the Bridegroom as bringer of the nuptial gift of forgiveness of sins, the medicine needed by all, since all are sinners (ἁμαρτωλούς is the last word before Matt 9,14-17), a medicine bought at the price of his own Paschal «departure». A contrast is also effected by the emphatic μὴ δύνανται... πενθεῖν of 9,15a, when Jesus had just spoken of οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες in 9,12. If a Synoptically transversal contact is allowed (Luke has no reference to Hos 6,6), Luke 5,39's old wine-drinker's θέλει (οὐδεὶς πιὼν

72 In LXX Gen 18,12 Sarah calls her husband Abraham κύριος. With respect to Matt, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 6 says: «The title does not appear on the lips of outsiders and is not simply polite speech».

73 Cf. Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 103: «In its canonical context, the [physician] saying presupposes that sin is a disease (cf. Isa 1.4-5; 53.5) [...]. In its Matthean context, [...] it is a parable whose meaning is transparent: the sick are the toll collectors and sinners, the strong are those who oppose Jesus, and the physician is Jesus». The latter comment is made by the authors in the awareness that this is not necessarily allegorizing. For the purification concern raised by the person of a physician, see Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33.



παλαιὸν θέλει νέον) contrasts with Jesus' use of the same verb in Matt 9,13 ("Ἐλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν).

The Διὰ τί of 9,14 is preceded by the Διὰ τί of 9,11. As Jesus' self-abasing solidarity with sinful humanity raised the Baptist's question in Matt 3,14, so in 9,11parr a διὰ τί question in Matt-Luke (the first in both) is asked by the Pharisees about Jesus' table sharing with tax-collectors and sinners. This is followed by Matt's second διὰ τί question, on non-fasting (the first in Mark). The fact of giving rise to questions shows the efficacy of the signs chosen by Jesus. Like his baptism at the hands of John, Jesus' table sharing and his disciples' non-fasting are two signs of the wonderful reality (in its essence, reconciliation with God through forgiveness of sins) expressed in wedding-mourning terms in 9,14-17.

Unlike Mark-Luke, Matt 9,10 makes clear that it is not Jesus who comes to sit at table with publicans and sinners, but, notice the ἐλθόντες, it is the other way round. The way in which Jesus' questioners formulate their question would appear to indicate the opposite. Still, this very formulation presupposes that the initiative for table fellowship is Jesus': Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν; The referents of the personal pronouns in Matt 9,10parr are ambiguous. In Matt 9,10a does the αὐτοῦ of αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου refer to Matthew or to Jesus? It is immediately preceded in 9,9b by an αὐτῷ that denotes Jesus. The same question can be asked, and the same remark made, of Mark 2,15a. The specification of Jesus' name in Matt 9,10b and Mark 2,15b functions as clarification of the ambiguity in Matt 9,10a and Mark 2,15a. The version of Luke 5,29 can be seen as a

clarifying of the ambiguity from the very beginning. Also in Luke, however, the denotation of the αὐτοῦ in ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ, being immediately preceded by an αὐτῷ that denotes Jesus, remains ambiguous (is it Levi's or Jesus' residence?).

The referents of the personal pronouns in Matt 9,10parr are really ambiguous. So, it is possible that Matt-Mark imply that it is Jesus who plays the host. Luke 5,29 does not, perhaps, contradict this, but only qualifies it. Luke's καὶ ἐποίησεν δοχὴν μεγάλην λέγει αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ can be understood in the sense that Levi, with exquisite considerateness, organized his festal banquet in the Capernaum house where Jesus is resident. Luke 5,29a's last αὐτοῦ, as we saw, may refer not to Levi but to Jesus, so that the feast is held in Jesus' house, not Levi's. This would fit in with the fact that in Matt<sup>74</sup> the definite noun ἡ οἰκία without specifiers (Matt 9,28; 13,1.36; 17,25)<sup>75</sup> seems to denote Jesus' Capernaum «headquarters» during his Galilean ministry. Possibly, this definite «house» is the Capernaum οἰκία Πέτρον of Matt 8,14parr<sup>76</sup>. As

74 The same may be true of Mark (cf. 1,29; 9,33; but the definite οἰκία of 10,10 is in Judaea and the οἰκία of 7,24 is anarthrous). Luke has only twice οἰκία in this sense (4,38; 5,29). Four times in Mark (2,1; 3,20; 7,17; 9,28) the indefinite οἶκος is also used without specifiers, perhaps in the sense of definite and unspecified οἰκία, except in 9,28 where the context points to Jesus' being away from the sea and from Capernaum.

75 If we include our text here (Matt 9,10parr), this would be the only time that there is a specifier in Mark-Luke (there is none in Matt), Jesus' headquarters being thus called «his house» (Mark 2,15=Luke 5,29). This is considered a possible meaning by C.S. Mann, *Mark*, The Anchor Bible 27 (New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland: Doubleday,1986) 229.

76 When another house is intended, this is always made clear by the context (Matt 8,6; Luke 7,6) or by the naming of the householder (Matt 9,23; 26,6=Mark 14,3; Luke 7,37.44; 8,51; 22,10.11.54). Luz, *Matthew*, II,

a matter of fact, in the context of these occurrences of a definite and unspecified οἰκία there is mention either of Capernaum (9,1; 17,24; Jesus' «own city», Matt 9,1), or of the sea (Matt 13,1; 17,27; Capernaum being by definition ἡ παραθαλασσία, Matt 4,13)<sup>77</sup>.

This understanding of Matt 9,10parr may explain why, even if the banquet is organized by Matthew-Levi after his call, Jesus, especially through being made the target of criticism and through what he says in Matt 9,13parr, appears to be the host and the tax collectors and sinners his guests<sup>78</sup>. Another fact confirms this. In the context of a banquet, καλεῖν is the specific term for «inviting»<sup>79</sup>, so that Jesus' οὐ γὰρ ἦλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλούς may well mean «I came not to invite the righteous, but sinners», invite them to a banquet, why not? Matt 9,13parr unveils the «invitation» motif present also in 9,15parr that speaks of «wedding guests» (but this is obscured for us by the uncommon Semitism οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφῶνος, which means, yes, «wedding guests»)<sup>80</sup>. The καλέσαι of 9,13parr reminds us that in the OT οἱ κεκλημένοι οἱ κλητοί

33 says: «Whether the house belonged to Jesus, to Peter (cf. 8:14), or to someone else is of no concern to Matthew».

77 If we include Matt 8,14parr and 9,10parr, we should add, for Capernaum Matt 8,5; 9,1; Mark 1,21; 2,1; Luke 4,31; for the sea, Mark 2,13. The definite unspecified «house» of Mark 9,33 is in Capernaum.

78 For Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 99-100 this is the probable understanding of our text. Cf. the προσδέχεται of Luke 15,2. Similarly, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33.

79 Cf. I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978) 220-221: «In the original Marcan form the verb καλέω probably had the specific sense “to invite”, using the metaphor of a meal».

80 For a demonstration that this Semitism means «wedding guests», see Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 71-89.

is the non-Semitic term for people invited to a banquet (1Sam 9,22; 2Sam 15,11; 1Kgs 1,41.49; Zech 1,7), including a wedding banquet (Judg 14,11), and so equivalent, in the latter case, to the Semitic phrase οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφῶνος. In 9,15parr the invitation is to be specified, of course, as «nuptial invitation», acceptance of which is signified by the non-fasting of Jesus' disciples. In this context, the criticism of which Jesus is made the target is a form of rejection of the invitation. In fact, in a nuptial context, one of the sorriest things that can happen to the spouses is to hear words of criticism, instead of words of praise. Criticizing the spouses is something reserved to outsiders, while the first task of a child of the bride chamber is praising the spouses.<sup>81</sup>

To conclude, whether it is Jesus who plays the host or Matthew-Levi, Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners offers us a stark picture of incarnate purity at work purifying sinful humanity. The *pointe* of the two nuptial mini-parables about new clothes and new wine in Matt 9,16-17 is precisely this: «Don't think that I, Jesus, am so foolish as to stitch new patches on old clothes or to pour new wine into old wineskins, causing senseless damage. No! If you see new patches being stitched on clothes and new wine being poured into wineskins, it means that the clothes are new clothes and the wineskins are new wineskins!»<sup>82</sup>. That is, Jesus' disciples adopt

81 Cf. b.Ber 6b: «R. Ashi says: The merit of attending a wedding lies in the words [of congratulation addressed to the bride and the bridegroom]» (English translation and comment by M. Simon, in Soncino I, 27. See also page 29).

82 See Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 219-233. Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 37: «The key to understanding vv.16-17 is probably their position in the macrotext of Matt 9:2-17».

the novelty of non-fasting because they, like the paralytic of Matt 9,1-8, have been made new by the forgiveness of sins they have received in faith.

### 3.2 Matt 9, 14-17's Following Context in Matt 9

The following context of Matt 9,14-17 is made up of four pericopes: Matt 9,18-26, Matt 9,27-31, Matt 9,32-34, Matt 9,35-38. As in the three preceding pericopes Jesus' name appears 5 times (9,2.4.9.10.15), in the Raising of the Ruler's Daughter Jesus' name is particularly present (twice, 9,22.23.). This characteristic is shared by Matt 9,18-26's Synoptic parallels (Mark 5,21-43; Luke 8,40-56), which, however, are, narratively, far from the nuptial pericope. This Christological mark is particularly present (twice, 9,27.30) also in the next pericope (Matt 9,27-31) and, as the introduction, in the last pericope (Matt 9,35-38). The name of Jesus is absent only from the last healing story (Matt 9,32-34), ominously overshadowed by the Pharisees' blasphemous insinuation. The title «Son of David» appears in 9,27

#### 3.2.1 Matt 9, 18-26parr

Matt 9,18-26, beginning with the absolute genitive Ταῦτα αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος αὐτοῖς, connects closely with what precedes<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Nothing similar appears in Mark-Luke where the following pericope is that of Plucking Grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2,23-28; Luke 6,1-5; recorded by Matt in 12,1-8). In Matt there are three other occurrences of the genitive absolute αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος, twice referred to Jesus (12,46; 26,47), once to Peter (17,5). The first appears to establish only a narrative connection with the preceding, while the second and the third also express a close temporal connection.

and through the use of λαλεῖν<sup>84</sup> gives a touch of solemnity to Jesus' words in 9,15-17.

The discipleship concern of Matt 9,14-17parr brims over into this pericope with the emphatic καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ (9,19b), an afterthought-like addition to ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ proper to Matt<sup>85</sup>. The προσέρχεσθαι motif of Matt 9,14 emerges again, but with a different motivation: in Matt 9,14 for questioning, in Matt 9,20 for healing (cf. 9,21); this is not an absolute difference, since questioning may be a search for spiritual healing. The «garment» motif of 9,16 reappears in 9,20-21, where the ἱμάτιον of Jesus has healing power, thus underlining the close connection between one's person and one's clothing, the latter being the expression of the former<sup>86</sup>. The unclean woman is made whole and clean by the simple touch of the fringe (or tassel) of Jesus' garment (9,20-21=Mark 5,28; cf. Luke 8,47; Lev 15,25-30). The Greek word κράσπεδον<sup>87</sup> used for the tassel stealthily touched by the woman (cf. 14,36) is the word

<sup>84</sup> Matt 26, Mark 21, Luke 31, John 60, Acts 60. The verb is not peculiarly Matthean, but Matt uses it always in a particularly significant way. With Jesus as subject it occurs 12 times: 8 times referring to Jesus' speaking in parables as here (Matt 9,18; 12,46; 13,3.10.13.33.34.34), once referring to Jesus' last words before his being betrayed by Judas (26,47), and 3 times introducing words of Jesus, including his very last words in Matt (14,27; 23,1; 28,18).

<sup>85</sup> The Synoptic parallels Mark 5,24 and Luke 8,42b mention only the crowd[s]. In the rest of the story, however, the discipleship concern is more evidenced in Mark-Luke than in Matt (cf. Mark 5,31.37.40; Luke 8,45.51).

<sup>86</sup> This close connection is significant also for the *pointe* of the garment saying in 9,16.

<sup>87</sup> A rare word, used only 5 times in the LXX, technically denoting the tassels demanded by Num 15,38-39 (the word occurs thrice) and Deut 8,23, and occurring elsewhere only in Zech 8,23.

used by LXX Zech 8,23 (ἐπιλάβονται τοῦ κρασπέδου ἀνδρὸς Ιουδαίου). This «Nations-oriented» text with its ὁ θεὸς μεθ' ὑμῶν ἔστιν expresses the deep meaning and the world-salvific efficacy of the Zion mourning turning into festal joy announced by Zech 8,19<sup>88</sup>, a motif that is the exact reversal of the joy-turning-into-mourning of Matt 9,15. The garment motif is present implicitly on the side of the woman, if one thinks of Isa 64,5's ὡς ράκος ἀποκαθημένης πᾶσα ἡ δικαιοσύνη ἡμῶν and sees in the woman's cured flesh ὁ οὐρανὸς καινὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ καινὴ, ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ of Isa 66,22 (cf. Isa 65,17).

The ruler's invitation to Jesus to come at the bedside of his dead daughter is readily accepted by Jesus and his disciples who follow him (9,18-19parr), in spite of the troublesome prospect of uncleanness (Num 19,11-16; 31,19.24; Sir 34,25[30])<sup>89</sup>. Jesus' raising of the dead girl to life radically resolves the problem of uncleanness (9,25parr). The miraculous «resurrection» terminology of 9,18 (ἐτελεύτησεν ... καὶ ζήσεται), 9,24 (οὐ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν τὸ κοράσιον ἀλλὰ καθεύδει), 9,25 (καὶ ἠγέρθη τὸ κοράσιον [Mark-Luke: ἀνέστη]) tinges with symbolic shades the ordinary «rising» terminology used elsewhere in chapter 9 of Matt (9,5.6.7

88 Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 249 refers to J.Y. Cummings, «The Tassel», 51-52. Zech 8,23 is referred to by Rupert, 232.235 who, relying on Matt's redactional presentation of the episode, sees in the woman a figure of the Gentiles who will believe in Jesus «from behind», i.e. without having seen him. The woman is comparable to the Gentiles because of her ritual impurity.

89 Cf. Lev 21,1; Num 6,9; Ezek 44,25-27. Highlighting the uncleanness issue is perhaps the reason for the simplification undergone by the Matt-Luke report, in comparison with the more circumstantial Mark.

Ἔγειρε, ἐγερθείς, καὶ ἐγερθείς, 9,9 ἀναστάς, 9,19 καὶ ἐγερθείς ὁ Ἰησοῦς). These «paschal» nuances enhance the import of the «healing», both spiritual and physical, that pervades Matt 9. Moreover, they make resound beyond Matt 9,15parr the «departure» motif sounded there. This enhancement and resounding themselves are grounded in the transcendent implications (Isa 54 and Isa 62) of the nuptial parable in 9,15 which can thus be seen as the semantic pivot of the whole chapter.

### 3.2.2 Matt 9, 27-31

The two blind men, barred from Temple worship because of their blindness (cf. 2Sam 5,8[9]b)<sup>90</sup>, in their blindness see in Jesus the «Son of David», who thus can cure them<sup>91</sup> (9,27-31; cf. Matt 20,29-34; Mark 10,46-52; Luke 18,35-43). Cured, they are restored to membership of the worshipping community. This implication is made explicit in Matt 21,14: «And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them». This mention of Jesus' Temple cures is peculiar to Matt. This kind of cures is for Matthew a pointer to the fact that Jesus is the Son of David<sup>92</sup>, but a Son of David greater than David: «It is not that Matthew shows Jesus to

90 Cf. also Lev 21,17-18 and Qumran's exclusion of blind and lame, blind and deaf from the messianic banquet (1QSa 2,8-9; MMT=4Q394 8 iii-iv; CD 15,15-17; 1QM 7,4-6). Cf. m.Hag 1,1 and W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, III, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 140; Hagner, *Matthew*, I, 601.

91 After Matt 1, this is the first time that Jesus is called «Son of David». Luz, *Matthew*, II, 48: «The two blind men in 9:27-31 represent, as it were, the answer of Israel to its Messiah that God wanted».

92 See Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 136.



be more than the Son of David, but instead that Matthew shows Jesus to be the Son of David who is more than David. Matthew depicts Jesus as the Christ, the uniquely anointed Son of David, who is uniquely capable of healing. David was the anointed king, but was not a healer: Jesus Christ, the Son of David, is now the final, climactic example of both»<sup>93</sup>.

The motif of «following», that, after beginning in Matt 9 with Matthew's call (9,9 ἀκολουθεῖ μοι... ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ)<sup>94</sup>, is paradoxically applied in a reversed way to Jesus in 9,19 (καὶ ἐγερθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ, a delicate hint at Jesus' self-abasing and active «being with»), returns here to the normal way of expressing (9,27, ἠκολούθησαν [αὐτῷ] δύο τυφλοί). The two blind men's following is a sign of faith expressed also in words: Ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς, υἱὸς Δαυίδ. They ask of Jesus something he is only too desirous to give (cf. the ἔλεος of 9,13)<sup>95</sup>. Mercy is the inner content of Jesus' «being with», expressed both in his following people (9,19) and in being followed by them (9,27). This twofold movement (following Jesus and being followed by him) is reflected in the twofold way Jesus «is with»: by inviting people to his house (9,10)<sup>96</sup> and by going into people's houses (9,23).

The cure of the two blind men, like the following one of the dumb demoniac, has a symbolic import<sup>97</sup> expressed in terms

reminiscent of the OT (Isa 42,7; 43,8): 9,30 καὶ ἠνεώχθησαν αὐτῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί; 9,33 καὶ [...] ἐλάλησεν ὁ κωφός. People need to have their eyes and ears healed by Jesus before they can really «see» and «hear»<sup>98</sup>. Compare the different reaction to seeing by the crowds (9,8 ἰδόντες δὲ οἱ ὄχλοι) and by the Pharisees (9,11 καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι). It is faith that opens the eyes to Jesus' active «being with» (9,2 τὴν πίστιν αὐτῶν; 9,22 ἡ πίστις σου; 9,28 Πιστεύετε... Ναὶ κύριε, 9,29 Κατὰ τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν). Faith produces a deep relationship between the faithful and Jesus. This relationship is expressed by Jesus in «paternal-filial» terms (9,2 Θάρσει, τέκνον; 9,22: Θάρσει, θύγατερ).

The sandwiching of 9,14-17 between 9,1-13 and 9,18-34 aims perhaps at presenting the various types of people<sup>99</sup> that are made whole, «new», by Jesus' nuptial and purifying «being with» them: in 9,1-8 the paralytic (brought to Jesus by four faith-ful friends) represents the sick; in 9,9-13 the faith-ful publicans represent the outcast public sinners, first among them Matthew himself; in 9,18-26 the faith-ful bereaved father represents all funeral mourners, while the faith-ful woman with a flow of blood represents the ritually unclean; in 9,27-31 the faith-ful blind men and in 9,32-33 the mute possessed by a demon (brought to Jesus by unnamed faith-ful people) represent the disabled.

93 Thus Kim Paffenroth, «Jesus as Anointed and Healing Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew», *Biblica* 80 (1999) 547-554. Quotation pp. 553-554.

94 NT 90, Matt 25, Mark 18, Luke 17, John 19, Acts 4, Paul 1, Rev 6.

95 This is pointed out by Luz, *Matthew*, II, 49.

96 Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33.

97 Noted by Luz, *Matthew*, II, 49.

98 Luz, *Matthew*, II, 47 refers here to Matt 13,13-15.

99 Not even the ruler of 9,18 is named (cf. Mark 5,22=Luke 8,41). This is noted by Luz, *Matthew*, II, 47.

### 3.2.3 Matt 9,32-34

The series of cures is closed by the mute demoniac (ἄνθρωπον κωφὸν δαίμονιζόμενον) whose demon is expelled by Jesus and who is thus enabled to speak (Matt 9,32-33=Luke 11,14-15; cf. Matt 4,24 and 12,22-24)<sup>100</sup>. Diabolic possession makes impure (cf. 8,28.32), but Jesus' word (λόγῳ, 8,16) and presence (see the starkness of the report, ἐκβληθέντος τοῦ δαιμονίου is all that is said) are sufficient to free the possessed. This forms a positive inclusion with the forgiveness of sins signified by the first sign in this chapter (9,1-8). A negative inclusion with the blasphemy accusation of 9,3 is formed, instead, by what follows. While the crowd reacts positively<sup>101</sup>, the Pharisees express a radical denial of Jesus' purifying power: «He casts out the demons by the prince of demons» (9,34; cf. Matt 12,24parr; Mark 3,30; John 7,20; 8,48.52; 10,20)<sup>102</sup>. Demons, as we have seen, are πνεύματα ἀκάθαρτα by antonomasia (Matt 10,1; 12,43). This way of calling the demons is rare in Matt, frequent in Mark, Luke, Acts, and Rev. The synonym δαιμόνιον (the usual appellation in Matt) appears to include the semantic value of both elements of this phrase. In fact, only Luke, and only once, has the pleonastic πνεῦμα δαιμονίου ἀκαθάρτου (4,33). Referring to demons, the word πνεῦμα is left unqualified (since the context does not admit of any ambiguity) only once in Matt (8,16), once in Mark (9,20), thrice in Luke (8,55; 9,39; 10,20;

<sup>100</sup> Blind and deaf/mute form a standard binomial in Isa 29,18; 35,5; 42,18.19; 43,8.

<sup>101</sup> Astonishment is a positive, even though not perfect, reaction. See Luz, *Matthew*, II, 50.

<sup>102</sup> Also in Luke 11,14-15 this insinuation follows upon the cure of a mute.

in 24,37.39 the meaning is «a spirit»)<sup>103</sup>.

What the Pharisees say is unforgivable blasphemy (unforgivable, because it denotes a hardened heart) against the Holy Spirit (12,31-32), as Jesus will explain when the outrageous insinuation is repeated (Matt 12,22-45). This blasphemy is unforgivable, not because God is not ready to forgive, but because such blasphemers refuse to be forgiven: when God shows you the light in the darkness (cf. Matt 4,16), if you insist in calling the light darkness, what else can God do to save you? The centrality in Matt 9 of the nuptial tenderness of 9,14-17<sup>104</sup> is matched only by the harshness of this «blasphemy» inclusion (explicit in different ways both in 9,3 and 9,34).

### 3.2.4 Matt 9,35-38

The last item in Matt 9,14-17's immediately following context is the third and last transitional narrative. This transitional narrative, as we saw, introduces the scriptural motif of «sheep without a shepherd»<sup>104</sup>, equivalent to that of the «lost sheep» (Matt 10,6; 15,24; Ezek 34, 4.16) and to that of the «scattered sheep» expressed by Jesus himself in Matt 26,31.

This concluding pericope follows immediately upon the blasphemous insinuation of the Pharisees in Matt 9,34: «He casts

<sup>103</sup> Otherwise, unqualified πνεῦμα in the Synoptics denotes either the Holy Spirit or the human spirit (in John it may denote the Holy Spirit, God as Spirit, life-giving spirit, the human spirit, the wind).

<sup>104</sup> The direct reference is to Num 27,17; Jdt 11,19; 2Chr 18,16. See also Ezek 34,5; 1Kings 22,17. The theme shepherd-sheep, however, is also characteristic of Jeremiah (Jer 23), Ezekiel (Ezek 34), Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40,11), and Zechariah (10-11.13). The shepherd-sheep image can have spousal nuances, as in Cant 1,7-8; 2,1-2.16; 6,3.

out demons by the prince of demons». More so than the corrupt high priests, the Pharisees are Israel's spiritual leaders (recognized as such by Jesus himself, cf. 23,2), but their attributing Jesus' activity to the prince of demons shows that they are sick with blindness, spiritual blindness (15,14a; 23,16.17.19.24.26; Luke 6,36; cf. John 9,39-41); they are blind especially regarding the problem of purification (23,25-26). They are blind guides, leading blind sheep to their death (15,14b). The people of Israel are truly «like sheep without a shepherd», because the shepherds they have are no shepherds (Ezek 34). They need «the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest» (Matt 9,37=Luke 10,2; cf. John 4,35-38). Israel needs new leaders, i.e. the Twelve Apostles that will suddenly appear in Matt 10,<sup>105</sup>

The sorry situation of the shepherdless sheep, induced in Israel by the misguided (blind!) spiritual leadership of too many Pharisees (23,2.13), hints at the reason why the bridegroom of Matt 9,15 must depart. The sheep will continue to remain without a shepherd if the true shepherd remains where he is. There is no retrieving of

105 The context suggests that the number δώδεκα has functional meaning, rather than foundational. The Israel of the twelve tribes (Gen 35,22; 42,13.32; 49,28), once constituted (Exod 24,4; 28,21; 36,21, etc.), regularly chooses twelve leaders for tasks that concern the whole people as such (Num 1,44; 7,2,3; Deut 1,23; Josh 3,12; cf. Num 13,1-16; 34,16-29). So «Twelve», rather than meaning «daß hier das neue Volk geschaffen wird», points to «welche Funktion und Aufgabe sie haben sollen». Thus K. Stock, *Boten aus dem Mit-Ihm-Sein. Das Verhältnis zwischen Jesus und den Zwölf nach Markus*, Analecta Biblica 70 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1975) 16-17. The Twelve are 12 because all the Twelve Tribes of Israel (i.e. Israel as a whole) needs to be purified by faith in the Good News announced by Jesus and by the 12 disciples he sends out to prolong and multiply his own announcement.

lost sheep, if the good shepherd does not risk his life, setting out in search for them (Matt 18,10-14=Luke 15,3-7; cf. Ezek 34,11-16). Jesus' ἦλθον saying in 9,13, however, points to a departure that has already taken place, first of all the departure from Nazara in 4,13parr for Capernaum (=John 2,12). Now no longer in his Nazareth but in «his own» Capernaum instead, Jesus is already to be seen as the shepherd out in search of the lost sheep. His ἦλθον, however, may also denote even more basic departures (cf. Matt 2,6 ἐκ σοῦ γὰρ ἐξελεύσεται ἡγοῦμενος; 2,15 ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν υἱόν μου), namely, the departures of his Incarnation and of his Passover.

Having reached the end of Matt 8-9, we may note that the purification motif does not die out with Matt 8-9. On the contrary, «the miracles in 8-9 have been selected with an eye towards the scripture quoted in 11.4-6»<sup>106</sup>: «Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them». This Scripture (11,5), referred to by Jesus in answer to a question put to him by the Baptist through his disciples (11,2-3), is a complex Isaianic quotation characterized by the purification concern (Matt 11,5=Luke 7,22; cf. Isa 26,19; 29,18; 35,5-6; 42,18; 42,7; 61,1). The third Isaianic text is part of Isa 35,1-10<sup>107</sup> that concludes with a «mourning turning into joy»

106 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 1 (see *Ibidem*, 139. 242).

107 Isa 34-35 are closely related to Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah. See O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39. A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1974) 351-366 (henceforth, O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*); K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah. A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, tr. M. Kohl, ed. P. Machinist, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 371-372.

prophecy (35,10), while the last is the beginning of Isa 61,1-11, a Trito-Isaianic prophecy steeped in nuptial imagery (61,3.10). Not only Matt 8-9, but the rest of Matt (cf. 14,13-14; 14,35-36; 15,29-31; 21,14; 27,51-54) stands under the light of this fundamental reference by Jesus to Isaiah's prophecy (Matt 11,4-5) with the Beatitude Jesus attaches to it: «And blessed is he who takes no offense at me» (Matt 11,6=Luke 7,23).

Before Matt 11 the purification motif is picked up in the commission given by Jesus to the Twelve (10,1.8), a commission limited in scope to Israel alone, since the Samaritans and the Gentiles are declared out of bounds (10,4). It is Israel that needs purifying in the first place. Once purified, she will be of salvific significance for the Gentiles, as the Torah, the Former and Latter Prophets, and the Sages have foretold (Ex 19,5-6; 1Kgs 8,41-43; Tob 13,11; Ps 47[46],9; 87[86],4-7; Wis 18,4b; Isa 56,3.6-8; 60,11-14; 66,18-21; Zech 8,20-23; 9,7; 14,16.)

### 3.3 Matt 9,14-17 as Part of the Central Transitional Narrative in the Light of the Preceding and Following Contexts

In Matt 9, Jesus by deed and word unveils God's mystery (9,6.8; cf. 9,3: οὗτος βλάσφημεῖ)<sup>108</sup>. Factual and verbal signs are needed as pointers to this mystery. The healing miracle (9,5-8) is

<sup>108</sup> That God is involved in forgiveness of sins is so clear that Matt does not record the reason why Jesus' words can be considered blasphemous (cf. Mark 2,7=Luke 5,21). Differently, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 28.

a factual sign and Jesus underlines its sign value (9,6<sup>par</sup>: ἵνα δεῖδῃτε), just as its «numinous» effect on the bystanders is noted by all the Synoptics, but by Matt in particular (9,8<sup>par</sup>). Jesus' calling and immediate transformation of Matthew from tax collector into follower (9,9: ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ) is another miracle, as Matthew too is freed from the impurity of sin<sup>109</sup>. The healing of the woman with blood-flow and the raising from death of the ruler's daughter in Matt 9,18-26 are two other powerful signs. From the vantage point of the purification concern and of Matt 9,1-8, all healing miracles are signs of the gift of forgiveness of sins that is being offered<sup>110</sup>. Miracles, however, are deeds of power, direct signs of what Jesus *can do*, indirect signs of who Jesus *is*. The relativity of such signs is pointed out by Jesus himself when he orders the cured blind men: Ὁρᾶτε μηδεὶς γινωσκέτω (Matt 9,30; cf. 8,4). Who Jesus is lies a level deeper than what he does<sup>111</sup>. For this level,

<sup>109</sup> That Matthew's following means his being purified from sin is clear from the purification background we have analyzed. According to Matt, Jesus speaks of tax collectors as equivalent to sinners (cf. 5,46), «tax collector» forming a binomial with «Gentile» (18,17) and with «prostitute» (21,31-32), just as it forms a binomial with «sinner» for Matt itself (9,10), for the Pharisees (9,11), and for Jesus' contemporaries who do not believe in him (11,19).

<sup>110</sup> Beda Venerabilis, *In Marci Evangelium expositio*, PL 92, 151: «manducavit cum peccatoribus, ut gratiam cerneret, agnosceres potestatem»; Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 89. Also W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, I, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 415-416: «Given the firm connexion between sin and sickness in Judaism and early Christianity [...], Jesus' healing ministry may be viewed as a saving of his people from their sins (cf. 1.21)». Similarly, Luz, *Matthew*, II, 27.

<sup>111</sup> In this sense, we can say with Luz, *Matthew*, II, 2-3 that Matt tells an «inner» (3), «“theological” story of Jesus» (2), without, however, excessively opposing this story to the «chronological-geographical sequence of events» (*Ibidem*, 2).



Jesus prefers to use signs that, paradoxically, point more directly to who he is, while confirming his «self-abasing solidarity» with sinful humanity. These signs begin to appear in Matt 9,10-17parr.

### 3.3.1 The Nuptial Feasting / Non-Fasting Sign

In Matt 9,10parr Jesus takes the initiative as host to invite (καλέσαι) «tax-collectors and sinners» to his table. This is not mere table sharing. It is festive table sharing, given the crowded banquet hall (9,10=Mark 2,15 πολλοί, ὄχλος πολύς, Luke 5,29)<sup>112</sup>. As such, it is a sign of salvation through Jesus' presence seen as the realization of Isa 25,6-8's salvific banquet promise<sup>113</sup>. Within this wider factual sign of salvation, a narrower sign appears in Matt 9,14-17parr, namely, the non-fasting of Jesus' disciples.

112 To «celebrate» means «to be many»: «celebro [...]I. To go to a place or person in great numbers or often, to frequent, to fill (syn[onym] frequento; class[ical]» (Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary. Revised, Enlarged, and in Great Part Rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1876) 308. Similarly, A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1951) 196.

113 Davies-Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, 101: «Jesus, following established custom, often spoke of the kingdom of God as though it would be a great banquet (cf. 8.11; 22.1-14; 25.1-13; 26.29)». Two of the four references speak of a nuptial banquet. Whether the banquet in Isa 25,6-8 is salvific only for Israel or also for the nations is discussed: W.A.M. Beuken, «The Prophet Leads the Readers into Praise: Isaiah 25:1-10 in Connection with Isaiah 24:14-23 Seen against the Background of Isaiah 12», in H.J. Bosman – H.V. Grol *et al.*, ed., *Studies in Isaiah 24-27*, The Isaiah Workshop – De Jesaja Werkplaats, Oudtestamentische Studiën 43 (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2000) 121-156 is for a positive answer, D.C. Polaski, *Authorizing an End. The Isaiah Apocalypse and Intertextuality*, Biblical Interpretation Series 50 (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2001) 161-198 for a negative one.

The narrative continuum could suggest that Jesus' table sharing and his disciples' non-fasting is the very same thing, seen from two different angles. It is possible that Jesus' table sharing and his disciples' non-fasting took place on a «Zion mourning» fast day (cf. Zech 7,1-7; 8,19; Bar 1,14; etc.)<sup>114</sup>. In the light of texts like Isa 54 and Isa 62, «Zion mourning» is of an essentially nuptial nature. If Jesus' and his disciples' feasting and non-fasting meant their discontinuation of traditional «Zion mourning», this would kill two birds with a stone, i.e. would signify both God's merciful love for sinners and the reversal of Zion mourning into «Zion nuptial feasting». It may be doubted, of course, whether banqueting with sinners and nuptial feasting are two birds or just one. It may have been a little different for well-off tax collectors, but, for ordinary Galileans, nuptial banquets were probably the only banquets they had experience of, so much so that one of the nouns for «wedding» in Hebrew and Aramaic is simply «banquet» (Hebrew מִשְׁתֵּה, Aramaic מִשְׁתֵּה/מִשְׁתֵּה)<sup>115</sup>. In the mind of Galilean peasants and fishermen, the joy of banqueting may have been, most of the times, simply nuptial joy.

This double sign, feasting (Matt 9,10-13) and non-fasting (Matt 9,14-17), points to Jesus' salvific presence as fulfilling not only Isa 25,6-8, but also the mourning-nuptial and new-and-eternal-nuptial prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Deutero-Trito-Isaiah, Zechariah,

114 See Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 203-207.369-375.

115 Cf. P. JOÜON, *L'Évangile de Notre-Seigneur Jésus Christ. Traduction et commentaire du texte original grec, compte tenu du substrat sémitique*, Verbum salutis 5 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1930) 134.

and Baruch (Isa 54,1-10; 60,20b; 61,2b-3; 62,1-12; 66,10-11; Jer 31[38],13.21-23; 33[40],10-11; Bar 5,1; Ezek 16,59-63; Zech 8,19.) While the non-fasting factual sign is narrow (only Jesus disciples are said to be non-fasting), Jesus' explanatory words suppose a wider semantic spectrum (the «children of the bride chamber» denote «wedding guests» in general). This wider denotation demands that we consider as wedding guests of Jesus' salvific wedding with «my Church» (Matt 16,18)<sup>116</sup> not only his disciples, not only the «tax collectors and sinners» who share his table, but all the people who in Matt 8-9 we have seen bringing to fruit in their lives, through faith, the purifying presence of Jesus the Bridegroom. Like the non-fasting of Jesus' disciples, like the table sharing of publicans and sinners, each story of these poor people is a humble and powerful sign of Jesus' identity as the nuptial ἀρχηγός (Jer 3,4).

### 3.3.2 The Medical Image

Matt 9,12 (Οὐ χρειάν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροὺ ἄλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες) gives a «medical», self-abasing, slant to Jesus' nuptial feasting. Jesus' καλέσαι in 9,13 is issued by him as «physician». Jesus is like one of the *Medecins-sans-frontières* who risk their health and their lives, going and curing the sick where they lie in their sickness. Jesus' table sharing fulfils the radical healing purpose implied in the banquet prophecy of MT Isa 25,6-8<sup>117</sup> and prophecies like Jer 3,22 («I will heal your faithlessness»),

<sup>116</sup> See Fedrigotti, *The Bridegroom*, 249-276.

<sup>117</sup> In Isa 25,6-8 the healing is so radical that death itself is abolished. On the extraordinary quality of this prophecy see O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 199-202; John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC 24 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985) 331-332.

Jer 33[40],6 («Behold, I will bring to it health and healing»)<sup>118</sup>, and Mal 3,20 [4,2] («the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings»), reversing no-healing texts like those of Jer 8,15.22; 14,19<sup>119</sup>. Jesus' last words in 9,13 (οὐ γὰρ ἦλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλούς) state clearly, out of metaphor, that the cure he brings is effective on the fundamental level of righteousness and forgiveness of sins.

### 3.3.3 The Sacrificial Image

Matt 9,13 (πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστίν, Ἐλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν)<sup>120</sup> gives a «sacrificial», purifying, slant to Jesus' nuptial feasting. Jesus, quoting Hos 6,6a: «For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice [Heb. *zebah*] [6b: the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offering [Heb. *'ola*]]. This quotation sets up a relative opposition<sup>121</sup>

<sup>118</sup> This implies forgiveness of sins (Jer 33[40],8; Jer 33[40],9 perhaps contains nuptial nuances in the «name of joy», the «praise», the «glory»).

<sup>119</sup> In LXX Zech 10,2 the theme of healing links up with that of shepherding in the same manner Matt 9,35-36 links up these two themes.

<sup>120</sup> Only underestimating the pervasive character of the purification concern can one say with Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33 that the mercy-sacrifice Hosean quotation «is rather disturbing here and disrupts the context». Moreover, the appeal to Hos 6,6 is not necessarily as polemical as U. Luz makes it out to be, since, as U. Luz himself points out (*Ibidem*, 34 note 41), Jesus' introductory formula is traditional. Cf. A. Mello, *Evangelo secondo Matteo: commento midrashico e narrativo* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 1995) 167, who refers to rabbinical texts that use Hos 6,6 in a way similar to that of Jesus and explains the rabbinic introductory formula thus: «“Uscite e vedete”, cioè “uscite” dalla casa di studio e “imparate” dalla vita».

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Luz, *Matthew*, II, 33-34. Similarly, regarding Hosea, D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987) 110; F.I. Andersen, D.N. Freedman, *Hosea*, AB 24 (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 430-431. Somewhat differently, J.L. Mays, *Hosea. A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1969) 98 (henceforth, Mays,

between mercy (Heb. *hesed*, faithful covenantal love) and ritual sacrifice (Heb. *zebah*) viewed as agents of purification. In the time of Jesus, the opposition would have been understood to be between mercy and Temple sacrifice. What is meant by «relative opposition» is that mercy is not opposed to sacrifice as such, but only to «merci-less sacrifice». Jesus feasting is meaningful only as an expression of mercy. A merci-less feasting would be as meaningless as merci-less sacrifice. After all, *zebah* sacrifice involved a meal, so that *zebah* could also be translated «sacrificial meal». *Zebah* sacrifice involves feasting, because (as opposed to the *'ola* sacrifice) it is «the sacrifice in which the worshippers participate by sharing a meal to establish community with the deity»<sup>122</sup>. As merci-less feasting would have no value, so merci-ful sacrifice retains its value. It will find its final fulfillment in Jesus' Last Supper, the «once for all» (Heb 7,27; 9,12; 10,10) Paschal Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood «poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins» (Matt 26,28).

Hos 6,6 is spoken as the culmination of Hos 6,1-5 and as the introduction to Hos 6,7-10 that concludes: ἐμὴ ἡ ἰσχυρὴ καὶ ἰουδα (6,10b). Similarly, Ps 51[50],19-21 with its «broken and contrite heart», LXX Dan 3,39-40 with its «self-abasement», etc. bear witness to attitudes that prevail over Temple sacrifice, giving it its purifying value. The contrast between feasting and fasting

corresponds to the relative opposition that holds between mercy and sacrifice. Jesus' table sharing in Matt 9,10-13 and non-fasting in 9,14-17 embody a mercy that transforms and purifies people better than Temple sacrifices and traditional fasts can do. Jesus offer of ἔλεος in 9,13 is almost immediately availed of by the two blind men (ἐλήθησαν ἡμᾶς, 9,27). After all, ἵλασθαι σοι is the divine promise with which the great nuptial prophecy of Isa 54,1-10 ends. By referring to «sacrifice», Jesus' quotation of Hos 6,6 indirectly draws attention to the purifying efficacy of his merciful feasting<sup>123</sup>. This efficacy fulfills, and so brings to an end, the purifying function of Israel's penitential practices in general (fasting is one of them) and of Temple sacrifices in particular. Seen from the point of view of Jesus' fulfillment of the Temple sacrificial system, the opposition between mercy and sacrifice is no longer relative but absolute. After Jesus' «sacrifice», Temple sacrifices have no longer reason to exist (cf. Heb 10,1-18) and fasting will be a sign of participation in his «sacrifice». This is because Jesus' merciful and purifying, physician-like and bridegroom-like, presence transforms people better than ritual «sacrifice» and «fasting» can do.

In tradition, the purifying power of Jesus' presence has been highlighted in connection with whether non-fasting would not

Hosea); H.W. Wolff, *Hosea, A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea*, tr. G. Stansell, ed. P.D. Hanson, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 120-121.

<sup>122</sup> Mays, *Hosea*, 98, who goes on saying: «[In Hos 6,6b] Knowledge of God is opposed to the burnt offering in which the whole animal is consumed as an act of adoration to the deity [*'ola*]».

<sup>123</sup> What Luz, *Matthew*, II, 34 says about «mercy» is valid also for the purifying function represented by «sacrifice»: «in the context of Matthew 8-9, the quotation from Hos 6:6 is a kind of “explanatory word” of Jesus' healings. [...] Spoken to the Pharisees it means: God and learn that I fulfill the command of the prophet! [...] for Matthew the fulfilling of the Law and the Prophets takes place primarily through Jesus' *behavior*. [...] The parenthetic dimension comes only after the christological dimension» (emphasis original).

undermine self-control. This interesting question is raised with regard to Jesus by Theophylactus Achridensis<sup>124</sup>. According to him, the Baptist's disciples wondered how could Jesus succeed in curbing his concupiscence without fasting when even the Baptist succeeded only through fasting. Theophylactus answers: ἡγνύουν γὰρ ὅτι Ἰωάννης μὲν ἄνθρωπος ψιλὸς, καὶ ἐξ ἀρετῆς δίκαιος· Χριστὸς δὲ αὐτοαρετὴ ὡς θεός. In his Commentary on the Gospel according to Luke, Theophylactus raises the same question with regard to the disciples<sup>125</sup>.

To conclude this section, we may now try to apply to their preceding and following contexts the parabolic *pointes* of Matt 9,15parr and 9,16-17parr, which, on the parabolic level, consist in deducing from the nature of an accident the nature of a substance (9,15: seeing people feasting instead of fasting, think that a wedding is going on; 9,16-17: seeing new contents, think that new containers

contain them). On the real level symbolized by the parable, the *pointes* consist in deducing from the novelty of behaviour, not a patching up of an old person, but the radical transformation of the person into a new being. On the real level, following in reverse order the narratives of Matt 9, these *pointes* could be formulated thus: if a mute speaks, he is no longer possessed by demons; if blind men see, they are no longer slaves to their handicap; if a house with a dead girl admits Jesus, that house is no longer an unclean «house of the dead»; if a girl's hand is taken by Jesus, that girl is no longer a corpse; if a woman plagued with chronic uncleanness touches Jesus, she is no more unclean; if former zealous «Zion mourners» stop mourning (fasting), it is because Zion is no longer a neglected or rejected lady, but the happy bride of the Divine Bridegroom; if publicans and sinners accept Jesus' invitation to share his table, they are no longer sinners because the sin-remitting new and eternal nuptial covenant has dawned and «the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings» (Mal 3,20a [4,2a])<sup>126</sup>; if a publican abandons his desk to follow Jesus, he is no more a «publican»; if the disabled and the sick (i.e. people debarred, like lepers, from participation in the expiatory sacrificial cult) are the object of divine mercy that heals them remitting their sins, then Heaven's Reign has really approached Israel and, through Israel, humanity.

<sup>124</sup> Theophylactus Achridensis, EPMHNEIA EIS TO KATA MATΘAION EYAPTEAION, PG 123, 229

<sup>125</sup> Theophylactus Achridensis, EPMHNEIA EIS TO KATA MATΘAION EYAPTEAION, PG 123, 767-768. So does St. Albert the Great, *Enarrationes in Evangelium Matthaei*, in *Opera omnia*, XX, ed. A. Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1893) 424, who explains: «Causa autem fuit, quia praesentia Christi plus abstulit ab eis libidinem quam omnis afflictio corporalis». Similarly St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, ed. R. Cai (Taurini – Romae: Marietti, 1951) 121: «cum erat presens, custodiebat eos ab excessu; ideo non oportebat eos jejunare; unde in Joann. xvii, 12: *Pater cum eram cum eis, conservabam eos*. Sed Joannes Baptista non habebat hanc virtutem, ideo jejunare debebant ejus discipuli. Sed quando Christus ablati sunt, eos oportuit jejunare». Of course, such comments seem to presuppose that in the time of Jesus fasting was undertaken as a form of asceticism, rather than as an expression of mourning.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Luke 7,41-47. Taking the image of the physician as viewing point, we could say: «If the sick are in the company of the doctor, this means that the sick are no more sick or, at least, that they are on the way to recovery».



#### 4. Results of Study of Immediate Context of Matt 9,14-17 within Matt 8-9

Matt 9,14-17 is part of Matt 8-9, within which it is part of the second «transitional narrative» (9,9-17; the first being 8,16-22, the third 9,35-38). The three transitional narratives share the same basic elements: a narrative, an explicit or implicit reference to prophecy, a pronouncement of Jesus. They also share common motifs: healing, following, discipleship, crowding, and, again, prophecy. The radicalism of the demands of the first transitional narrative is explained by the utter newness of the nuptial salvation revealed in the second, a newness itself accounted for by Israel's situation, described by the last transitional narrative as the total disarray of «shepherdlessness».

The purification concern looms like an arch over the narratives of Matt 8-9 including the nuptial pericope (9,14-17). This concern, in its most radical form, i.e. forgiveness of sins, is explicitly present from the very beginning of Matthew (1,21), characterizes the Baptist's ministry, qualifies the beginning of Jesus' own public ministry. The miracles of physical renovation and purification that fill Matt 8-9 are explicitly presented by Jesus as signs of the total purification brought about by the remission of sins declared and effected by his ἐξουσία as the humble and glorious Son of man (9,1-8). Basic motifs of Matt 9 are the following: the source of all renewal is Jesus' zealously active «being with» (i.e. his nuptial presence) expressed by his seeing, listening, speaking, coming and going; the necessary condition for renewal is the response of

faith, expressed in terms of following, discipleship, and being good «children of the bride chamber»; the depth of the renewal touches the roots of life and death, both physical and spiritual, expressed in terms of remission of sin, liberation from diabolic possession, and resurrection from the dead.

Jesus' festive table sharing with tax collectors and sinners (9,10-13) provides the immediate narrative context for the Baptist's disciples' non-fasting question and for Jesus' reply in terms of nuptial newness. This previous context gives direct expression to the «medical» character of Jesus' salvific role. It also makes visible the true nature of Jesus' feasting initiative (the cause of his disciples' non-fasting), which is not arrogant disregard for established custom, but merciful self-abasement with greater purifying capacity than Temple sacrifices. Jesus' table sharing is the wider factual symbol of the coming true of the salvific banquet promised by Isa 25,6-10. The consequent non-fasting of Jesus' disciples, instead, against the background of the nuptial-mourning prophetic promises, is the narrower factual symbol of the present realization of the new and eternal nuptials between YHWH and his people, through the purifying and all-renewing remission of sins bestowed by Jesus' self-abasing, merciful, physician-like and bridegroom-like «being with».

Will Heaven forgive me my sin, if I pray for forgiveness? Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son of God become Son of man, has come to tell us «Yes, Heaven forgives». Through Jesus, God gives us the grace of being recreated by Heaven's forgiveness. Mysteriously but really, like Abraham who saw Jesus's day and «was glad»

(John 8,56), even Confucius experienced the grace of Heaven's forgiveness in Christ, otherwise he would not have said, as he did, «Heaven produced the virtue that is in me»<sup>127</sup>.

### 摘要

在瑪竇福音中，第八至九章耶穌的奇蹟（十大奇蹟）是緊隨在第五至七章耶穌的言論（山中聖訓）之後。語境和文化角度的研究，揭示出這兩章在儀節、醫療和婚姻方面表達了一個整體的淨化關注。這個基本的關注，一方面浮現在九個有關身體康復，心理健康，身體完整和安全，甚至生命的奇蹟敘述裡；另一方面，是在三個有關作為門徒正確的選擇和宗教行為的過渡敘述裡。不過，從福音和聖經整體的超敘述層面，這些受到文化限制的具體淨化關注，可作為打開一種穿透所有時代和地域的更深關注的密碼。這關注就是天主通過納匝肋人耶穌，那位成為人子的天主子（瑪9:26）所施予的赦罪恩典，為每一個人所帶來的徹底更生，甚至是重生。



127 Confucian Analects, Book VII, Chapter 22, 202.