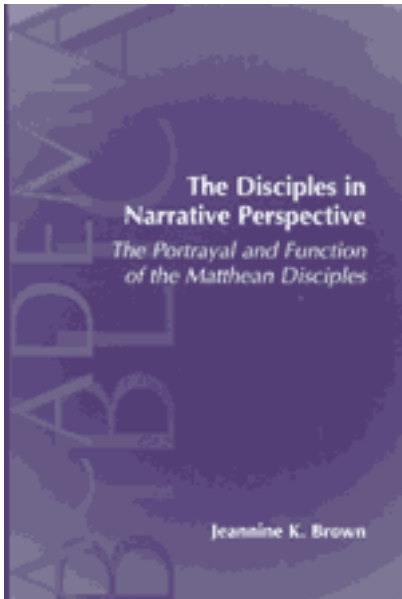


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The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples

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This book is Brown's revised Ph.D. dissertation completed in 2001 at Luther Seminary under the supervision of Arland Hultgren. The main thesis is that, in contrast with the results of redaction-critical readings of Matthew, not only do the disciples frequently misunderstand Jesus' mission and teaching, but they also do not progress toward understanding as the story moves on. In fact, the disciples represent only one aspect of discipleship in Matthew; they function both as role models to whom the implied reader can identify and as counterpoints of discipleship.

To arrive at this thesis, Brown begins by examining scholarship on the question of discipleship in Matthew (ch. 1). As she examines work done from a redaction-critical perspective by Gerhard Barth, Ulrich Luz, Mark Sheridan, Robert Gundry, Andries van Aarde, Michael Wilkins, and Andrew Trotter, she finds that most envision the disciples as people of "little faith" (Matt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20) who nevertheless understand Jesus' identity and mission. Still, in his unpublished dissertation, Trotter brings a discordant note to this symphony as he notices the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus from the manner they respond to the passion predictions. Brown observes that redaction critics are practically

unanimous in claiming that the disciples' understanding functions in the textual world to underline that Jesus is an effective teacher. In addition, redaction critics generally assume that the disciples stand in the story for some extratextual reality in Matthew's church. There is nonetheless disagreement on the identity of the disciples with the whole congregation (Barth and Gundry) or only with the leadership (Sheridan, Minear, and van Aarde). Brown also notices a lack of clarity in regard to the Matthean concept of discipleship, as most scholars consider the disciples to be exemplary at different levels. Brown examines thereafter the contributions made by Jack Kingsbury, Richard Edwards, Warren Carter, David Howell, and Donald Verseput, all working from a narrative perspective. In contrast to redaction critics, most of them conclude that the disciples are depicted as people of little faith whose understanding of Jesus' identity and mission is insufficient. In addition, several of them consider the disciples as expressing partly the Matthean perspective on discipleship (Kingsbury, Howell, and Verseput).

Brown remarks that redaction-critical study of discipleship in Matthew concentrated mainly on the differences between Matthew and Mark without paying enough attention to the Matthean specificity. Besides, redaction critics mostly exercised their talent on Matt 13–17, leaving aside Matt 18–20, which also portrays the disciples interacting with Jesus. Finally, redaction critics have dealt with the question of the disciples' understanding by focusing on the use of terms such as *συνιέναι* and *νοέω* while neglecting to investigate this question by looking at whole narrative sections.

For that purpose, Brown concentrates first on the portrayal of the disciples in Matt 16:21–20:28 using narrative criticism, especially the modes of characterization of the disciples, understood in this study as being the Twelve. In chapter 2, she justifies the boundaries of her section by the adoption of a three-part division of Matthew (1:1–4:16; 4:17–16:20; 16:20–28:20; suggested by Kingsbury on the basis of the phrases *Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς κηρύσσειν καὶ λέγειν*, (4:17); *Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς δεικνύειν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ* (16:21), which indicate new stages in the narrative). The section of 16:21–20:28 is characterized by the literary device of questions asked to Jesus. Brown also discusses the methodology of characterization and leans toward considering mainly how the disciples contribute to the plot instead of investigating how they could be portrayed as multifaceted personalities who undergo development as the story unfolds. This latter conception appears less promising in the study of ancient literature. In her study of characterization of the disciples, Brown considers the following elements: the disciples' action, their words, Jesus' actions

toward the disciples, Jesus' words to them, and the narrator's comments about them.

In chapter 3, Brown examines how the disciples are portrayed in Matt 16:21–20:28 (more specifically, in 16:21–28; 17:1–13, 14–20, 22–23, 24–27; 18:1–20, 21–35; 19:1–12, 13–15, 16–26; 19:27–20:16; 20:17–19). She finds that if the disciples understand some statements made by Jesus (e.g., the one concerning the correlation between Elijah and John the Baptist [17:13]), they mostly miss the point of Jesus' overall teaching. This can be seen in the fact that Jesus frequently debriefs them because of their assumptions concerning the kingdom of God, which are revealed by their questions and their reactions to questions asked by outsiders. Such debriefings represent opportunities for Jesus to teach them further that the kingdom of God, entrance to which is provided by God (Matt 19:26), implies status renunciation and a caring-for-another orientation. Even though the disciples seem to make no progress through the section toward a better understanding of Jesus' mission, Brown finds that the narrative expresses hope concerning Jesus' legacy in several ways: the disciples keep following Jesus in spite of their failings and thus remain disciples; the reader understands Jesus' teaching, in contrast with the disciples, and the presence of Jesus is promised to his future community (18:20).

In chapter 4, Brown undertakes to show the connection between the disciples' portrayal in 16:21–20:28 with their portrayal in the rest of the Gospel. In Matt 4:17–16:20, the disciples are introduced as Jesus' helpers in his ministry: fishers of people, a role spelled out more precisely in Matt 10:1–4, 7, but which excludes teaching. Thereafter, they are described as people of "little faith," especially in relation to Jesus' power and authority, in contrast with the faith demonstrated by some secondary characters such as the centurion (8:5–13), the Canaanite woman (15:21–28), the bearers of the paralytic (9:1–8), the hemorrhaging woman (9:20–22), and the two blind men (9:27–31). Their "little faith" and their lack of understanding shows up in their incapacity to heal (17:16, 20), for they do not understand that Jesus' authority has been extended to them. Such a lack of understanding connects well with the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom in 16:21–20:28.

Matthew 20:29–28:20 portrays the disciples as effective helpers of Jesus in such mundane things as fetching a donkey and colt for Jesus (21:1–11) and in preparing the room of the Passover meal (26:17–19). They fall short in the most significant part of their roles as they flee from Jesus and deny him. Brown explains this behavior by their "little faith" and lack of understanding of what

Jesus' mission implies (to suffer and to die). Even at the end of the Gospels, some are portrayed as still *hesitant* (Brown's suggested translation of ἑδίστασαν in 20:17) toward Jesus.

As she examines the function of the disciples in Matthew (ch. 5), Brown mentions that at the discourse level the initial portrayal of the disciples (4:18–22) is quite positive because of their response to Jesus and may attract the implied reader's identification to them. The implied reader has nevertheless to revise this impression as their "little faith" becomes clear, as well as their lack of understanding. At the level of Matthew's symbolic world about discipleship, Brown suggests that the disciples are only one aspect in the portrayal of discipleship in the Gospel. They share the scene with other characters displaying discipleship qualities and characters who represent a counterpoint to discipleship (e.g., the people from Jesus' hometown, Herod, the religious authorities). Not only is Jesus the teacher who can explain the characteristics of true discipleship, but he may also be seen as the one who embodies all the qualities related to discipleship. Brown assumes that in Matthew, discipleship is defined through two layers: (1) a focal layer that includes the teaching of Jesus concerning discipleship, the more positive aspects of the disciples' portrayal, and the other characters portrayed as presenting features of true discipleship; (2) a background layer composed of those in conflict with Jesus' claims and message and of the disciples portrayed in their more negative aspects.

The reviewer found the book very well written and the line of argument very clear. Its conclusions are cautious, in agreement with the premises and the results of the study of the different sections of Matthew's Gospel. As a result, the overall picture is convincing.

One could nevertheless question the relevance of including Matt 17:24–27 (payment of the temple tax) in the study, since the passage does not contribute much in the portrayal and function of discipleship in the First Gospel, as the author confesses (68). In addition, Brown finds the disciples' misunderstanding of true discipleship to be nonprogressive (92), although the request made by James and John's mother seems to the reviewer to express a paroxysm in terms of misunderstanding, since it expresses an attempt of bypassing other fellow disciples, as the group appears so far to have been unanimous in their questions and attitudes. Jesus' answer stands here in high contrast with the petition, for it requests the disciple to become the servant (διδάκονος) and even the slave (δούλος) of the others (Matt 20:26, 27).

In addition, the author seems to be at some point trapped by the model she uses to describe the function of the portrayal of the disciples in the Gospel. Indeed, she repeatedly uses a model borrowed from Kari Syreeni ("Separation and Identity: Aspects of the Symbolic World of Matt 6:1–18," *NTS* 40 [1994]: 522–41, esp. 523). The model distinguishes in Matthew the textual world (i.e., within the story), the concrete world (i.e., the disciples in relation with the Matthean community), and the symbolic world (i.e., the disciples in relation to Matthew's concept of discipleship). Brown acknowledges that the study of the concrete world appears problematic as one works from a narrative perspective but nevertheless does not totally dismiss this aspect of her model as she keeps mentioning the irrelevance of this question in narrative criticism. In spite of this profession of irrelevance, she finally concedes that "the general contours of the disciples' portrayal could be examined in light of the social-historical situation of the latter half of the first century, in order to discern how Matthew's message provides a challenge to his broader audience" (149).

Still, Brown's nuanced study of the disciples in the First Gospel represents a welcome contribution that demonstrates the relevance of narrative criticism for the treatment of such themes. In addition, its clear style and argument makes the book accessible to seminary and graduate students.