
Homelessness, Neoliberalism, and Jesus’ “Decision” to Go Rogue

An Analysis of Matthew 4:12-25

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As our dominant ideological climate, the age of neoliberal policy, pragmatism, and consensus has, often unknowingly and uncritically, filtered into our everyday lives, our thought processes, and even our interpretations of the Bible. It has, in the words of David Harvey, “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”¹ James Crossley’s recent book, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism*, has begun to uncover a number of these ideological peculiarities within historical Jesus research. He successfully exposes,

1. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

among other things, how Western individualism has influenced the construction of Jesus within both historical and popular quests.² In this chapter, I want to bring a similar lens to bear on the connection between Jesus and homelessness as it is constructed within Gospel exegesis and scholarship, in particular the beginnings of Jesus' itinerant ministry within the Gospel of Matthew. In doing so, I will undertake a re-reading of Matthew 4:12-25 using Marxist exegesis that attempts to embed both Jesus and the first disciples in a structured social world as it is encoded within the Matthean text. This should assist in disrupting narratives of neoliberalism in the world before the text as they shape and distort our dominant hermeneutical filters.

Built upon classical liberal and economic ideals, neoliberalism refers to the contemporary political movements emphasizing open markets, small government, privatization, and personal moral and economic responsibility. Its advent is usually associated with the Reagan and Thatcher era of the 1980s, and then was continued through the so-called "Third Way" policies beginning in the 1990s. It has now become a political orthodoxy across many Western democracies in which governments, whether left-wing or right-wing, focus more on managing the economy as best they can within neoliberal conditions than on "traditional" ideological stances. Within this matrix, homelessness is usually interpreted as a "choice" made for lifestyle reasons or individual moral and/or economic failings.

It is not uncommon to find interpretive connections between Jesus and homelessness in contemporary biblical scholarship. For all practical purposes, Jesus' itinerant ministry was a homeless one.³ A

2. James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

3. Some interpreters argue that Jesus cannot possibly be homeless in Matthew because he has a house (*oikos*) in Capernaum (Matt. 9:10, 28; 12:46; 13:1, 36; 17:25). However, we ought to avoid conflating the related but distinct terms "house" and "home" in English, even though

popular reconstruction of Christian origins developed by Gerd Theissen, for instance, describes the wandering charismatic followers of Jesus as essentially homeless, lacking family (having abandoned or renounced family), lacking possessions, and lacking protection. He writes:

Giving up a fixed abode was an essential part of discipleship. Those who were called left hearth and home (Mark 1:16; 10:28ff.), followed Jesus, and like him became homeless. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matt. 8.20) is a saying which applied to them.⁴

As I have argued elsewhere, the connection interpreters often make between Jesus and homelessness, however, is overwhelmingly constrained by neoliberal thinking.⁵ But it is at this nexus of Jesus and homelessness that a peculiar contradiction emerges: because Jesus is supposed to be the moral hero of the story, his homelessness becomes romanticized and the desperation and destitution that might typically accompany the experience gets extracted. If Jesus is, for Christians and/or biblical scholars, the ultimate object (or commodity) of theological and/or scholarly desire, in which Jesus functions in his salvific role as a mediator of our "surplus enjoyment" (*plus de jouissance*), then his homelessness acts as a fantasmatic screen, shielding us from the traumatic experience of homelessness proper and the apparent failure of our wider sociopolitical system in which homelessness remains a tangible political problem. In other words, homelessness is idealized in Jesus in a way that encourages us to

no distinction exists in Koine Greek: a house refers to a physical structure whereas a home refers to a much more complex notion of connection and orientation to a significant place of meaning. The conflation of these terms in English began during the rise of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century and assumes the emergence of capitalist modes of production and concepts of private property.

4. Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 10.

5. Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, *Social World of Biblical Antiquity* 2.10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014).

effectively divert our critical attention from some of these inherent contradictions contained within our own contexts of reading.

Within many contemporary interpretations, Jesus' itinerancy is predominantly conceived of as the result of his own free choosing (or at least a pious response to the driving force of the Spirit). A heightening of Jesus' agency enables the re-inscription of the prominent neoliberal myth that most people "choose" to become homeless for lifestyle reasons. For example, writing at the highpoint of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the British Matthean scholar R. T. France suggests that Jesus' "chosen way of life is one of homelessness and insecurity . . . and his disciples were called to share his style of life. This was a matter of choice, not of necessity, as Jesus' family was probably a comfortable, if not affluent, 'middle-class' one."⁶ The reverberations here of individual choice, homelessness as a lifestyle, and a universalizing estimation of the middle-class, is intriguing when viewed in tandem with neoliberal mantras espousing the centrality of individual responsibility. Similar reverberations emerge within some of the scholarly attempts to draw parallels between Jesus' itinerant ministry and the Greco-Roman philosophical school of the Cynics. It must be immediately cautioned, of course, that the Cynics' poverty was a chosen lifestyle, not one they were necessarily born into, as were peasants. In fact, most Cynics appear to have come from the educated elite and become "cynical" about Greco-Roman society. Stephen C. Barton sums up the contrast between the cynics and the itinerancy of Jesus and his disciples as follows:

[W]here the Cynics adopt a deliberate asceticism as an integral part of the wise man's revolt against culture and return to nature, the gospels speak more of involuntary deprivation and hardship in consequence of faithful missionary discipleship; and where the Cynics seek to reform the

6. R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1985), 160.

individual by a highly provocative onslaught on civilized conventions and popular opinion, there is in the gospels a positive summons to Israel and the nations to personal and social reform in preparation for the advent of God.⁷

In contrast to its conventional treatment in biblical studies, however, a range of scholarly perspectives on contemporary homelessness construct the issue as far more complex, often stemming from various economic and social crises, such as housing shortages, high unemployment, inadequate resourcing for the mentally ill, social distancing, and estrangement. This culminates in the creation of a vulnerable underclass, predisposing already at-risk members of society into episodes of homelessness.⁸ For the critical theorist Slavoj Žižek, homelessness emerges (along with the underclass, the ghettoized, and the permanently unemployed) as a *symptom* of the late capitalist universal system; a reminder of the structural deficiencies that remain beneath the surface and negate the “totalitarian logic of the proper capitalist utopia.”⁹ Might we not also conceive of Jesus' apparent homelessness as a symptom of wider structural crises? Not necessarily as a result of capitalism, of course, but rather the systemic and structural violence of the agrarian society in first-century Palestine and Judea?

While Jesus' itinerancy, by which I mean his traveling from one place to the next, is an integral part of his ministry, Matthew's Gospel includes a number of other episodes that pre-empt a shift to the margins. The flight to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23), for example, involves an infant forcefully displaced both geographically and politically from

7. Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 52.

8. See, for example: Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); Emily Meanwell, “Experiencing Homelessness: A Review of Recent Literature,” *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 1 (2012): 72–85.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 7.

his hometown (cf. 8:20; 13:54–58). Homelessness and displacement are not usually conditions that people freely choose to enact. Rather, external factors, often far beyond their control, influence their ability to act and react within a particular structured environment. The same is true within the narrative of Matthew’s Gospel in which Jesus’ actions must always be understood in relation to other events, characters, and external pressures. In what follows, I re-read the connection between Jesus and homelessness as symptomatic of wider social and political conditions as they are encoded within the text.

Structuring the Beginning of Jesus’ Ministry (Matt. 4:12-25)

Matthew 4:12–25 contains four distinguishable scenes: first, the arrest of John the Baptist (vv. 12–16); second, the proclamation of the kingdom (v. 17); third, the call of the first disciples (vv. 18–22); and finally, the inauguration of itinerant ministry, healings, and the spread of Jesus’ fame (vv. 23–25). We ought to exercise caution in our structuring of the text, however. In recent years a structuring of Matthew that views the opening words of 4:17 (“From that time Jesus began . . .”) as constituting an introductory formula to a new major section of the Gospel has gained some traction.¹⁰ A consequence of this structuring is that Jesus’ displacement to Capernaum in 4:12–13 becomes isolated from subsequent events.

Key to this structuring is the much-disputed formula ἀπὸ τότε (from that time) in 4:17. Ulrich Luz points out that the inclusion of this clause is intended precisely to establish a connection with the preceding verses.¹¹ The Matthean text often uses the adverb τότε as a

10. Kingsbury adopts this threefold structure of Matt: the presentation of Jesus (1:1–4:16); the ministry of Jesus to Israel and Israel’s repudiation of Jesus (4:17–16:20); and the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and his suffering death and resurrection (16:21–28:20). He suggests that the formulaic phrase “From that time on Jesus began . . .” (4:17; 16:21) initiates each new narrative block. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975).

connective particle to link two events through an unspecified passage of time. F. Neiryneck argues that enough narrative connections exist between 4:17 and 4:12-16 to warrant its inclusion in the same paragraph.¹² Indeed, as will be argued below, it is the eventual occurrence of the arrest of the Baptist which prompts Jesus to withdraw to Capernaum, go about calling the first disciples, and begin his itinerant ministry.

If taken together, the beginnings of the Matthean Jesus' ministry are best understood as an embedded *response* to the arrest of the Baptist, in addition to other social and political threads that are encoded within the text. While religious motivations for Jesus' ministry are certainly evident (and noted particularly by the eschatological context of proclamation of the kingdom), these must be balanced against the various political, economic, and social forces that drive his actions. A politicizing of these textures reveals that the arrest of the Baptist functions as a significant trigger for Jesus' "withdrawal" from Nazareth and the beginning of his ministry in Capernaum. As a result, the Matthean Jesus' itinerant ministry is from its very inception symptomatic of various crises within his wider sociopolitical environment.

Jesus Withdraws (Matt. 4:12-16)

After hearing of John's arrest, Jesus, sensing danger, withdraws (ἀνεχώρησεν) from Nazareth and settles in Capernaum. Commenting on Matthew 4:12-13, Luz supposes that

Matthew does not provide information about the subjective motives of Jesus for his return. Jesus goes to Galilee for the sole and uncomplicated

11. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, trans. J. E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 192.

12. F. Neiryneck, "ΑΠΟ ΤΟΤΕ ΗΡΞΑΤΟ and the Structure of Matthew," *ETL* 64, no. 1 (1988): 120-23.

reason that it corresponds to the divine plan that he minister to ‘Galilee of the Gentiles.’ . . . This applies precisely to the move to Capernaum also. Matthew underscores through the allusions to the following quotation that the move corresponds to the divine plan. Why Jesus (biographically) left Nazareth and chose Capernaum as residence is of no interest to him.¹³

To recall a key discourse of neoliberalism, it is curious that Luz frames Jesus’ movement in terms of a “choice” to enact God’s divine plan. Even though Jesus’ actions have economic, social, and political consequences, they are isolated from this context and treated as significant only insofar as they advance Jesus’ soteriological role. A more careful reading of the text, however, reveals that the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is not the result of an arbitrary choice. Rather, it begins with Jesus “hearing” (ἀκούσας) of John’s arrest. This echoes Joseph’s “hearing” (ἀκούσας) of Archelaus ruling over Judea in 2:22. Similarly, the verb used to denote Jesus’ movement is the same used multiple times to describe Jesus’ flight to Egypt: he is again prompted to withdraw (ἀναχωρέω) for safety and refuge. The verb ἀναχωρέω appears a number of times in Matthew in connection to episodes of sociopolitical danger, and typically describes the forced displacement of its subject (2:12, 13, 14, 22; 12:15; 14:13; 27:5).¹⁴

In his anti-imperial reading of this text, Warren Carter maintains that while John’s arrest causes Jesus to withdraw into Galilee, “Jesus’ withdrawal from the wilderness (around the Jordan) to Galilee is not for safety reasons (as in 2:12, 13, 14, 22).”¹⁵ He points out that Jesus withdraws into a dangerous territory, occupied by the Roman client Herod Antipas, and is made more dangerous by the Baptist’s arrest. Echoes to the previous displacement during 2:21–23, however, in

13. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 194.

14. Robert J. Myles, “Echoes of Displacement in Matthew’s Genealogy of Jesus,” *Colloquium* 45, no. 1 (2013): 33–34.

15. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 113.

which Joseph avoids the centers of power in Judea by withdrawing to (the still-dangerous) Galilee suggests that a similar move might be occurring here. Sean Freyne reasons that “the frequent withdrawals of Jesus might be interpreted as indicative of his need for constant vigilance before the threat of Herod, especially since there seems to be a conscious avoidance of the Herodian towns of Sepphoris and Tiberias.”¹⁶ The threat of Herod lingers and continues to drive the actions of Jesus. Carter himself notes how, with Jesus’ relocation, the “periphery” of Galilee symbolizes “a new and non-localized center” of divine presence.¹⁷

Other narrative elements provide further evidence that Jesus’ response to John’s arrest is symptomatic of external sociopolitical realities. The passive verb παραδόθη, for example, which alludes to the Baptist’s arrest or “handing over” in 4:12, occurs a number of times toward the end of the Gospel with respect to Jesus’ own arrest (26:2, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 45, 46, 48; 27:2, 3, 4, 18, 26) and thus makes a clear parallel between their shared fate: the final solution for outsiders who disrupt normalized society is extermination.

While Jesus’ move to Capernaum is motivated by self-preservation, another ideological dimension to consider is that of “withdrawal” as a subversive political act. It is here that the verb ἀναχωρέω in the context of Matthew 4 is most evocative. In his treatise of violence, Žižek distinguishes between two broad categories of violence in the world: *subjective violence*, a more visible form performed by a clearly identifiable agent; and *objective violence*, which includes both a “symbolic” violence embodied in language and its forms, and “systemic” violence, or the consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.¹⁸ The Baptist’s arrest, for

16. Sean Freyne, *Galilee: From Alexander the Great to Hadrian* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980), 222.

17. Carter, *Margins*, 113.

example, is not directly attributable to any one subject (e.g., Herod); rather, he and his disruptive/prophetic ministry of baptism is disposed of through objectively violent regulating mechanisms, in order that society may return to its smooth, uninterrupted functioning.

It is in addressing these less-than-obvious forms of systemic violence in the contemporary dominance of late capitalist-democracy that Žižek frames his argument not via a revolutionary “call to arms,” but rather through the *inaction* of sitting back and waiting, by means of a patient, critical analysis. There is no need for a fake sense of urgency for “[t]he threat . . . is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to ‘be active’, to ‘participate’, to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time . . . [t]he truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw.”¹⁹ Similarly, he contends that “the task today is to resist state power by withdrawing from its scope, subtracting oneself from it, creating new spaces outside its control.”²⁰ So too, Jesus’ “withdrawal” from society functions as a time of escape. His forty days in the wilderness (4:1-11) is a period of abstinence and testing. In verse 12, upon hearing of the Baptist’s arrest, Jesus further disengages from everyday life in Galilee. As we will see below, Jesus’ announcement of a heavenly kingdom extends this space outside the scope of societal control, and is followed by the subtraction of fishermen from full participation in the reigning ideological-political order.

Geographical Intertexture

After his “withdrawal” in verse 12, Jesus moves to “Capernaum, by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” (v. 13). In the first century, Capernaum functioned primarily as a seaside fishing village,

18. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 1–2.

19. *Ibid.*, 183.

20. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 339.

on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' settlement here is denoted by the verb κατοικέω, which can mean to live, dwell, or settle (down) in an intransitive sense, but can also describe the action of inhabiting a body or space for a limited period of time.²¹ Jesus' settlement in Capernaum, however, is not permanent; the town does not function as a site of enduring residence, nor does it feature subsequently as a point of orientation (and moreover, he later attacks it in 11:22-23).

The withdrawal to Capernaum might, in fact, render a certain psychological change for Jesus. In considering the itinerancy of Jesus' ministry from the context of Jamaican migration, Paul Zilonka suggests that villages like Nazareth usually foster strong kinship ties and the personal psychological impact of this transfer of residence involves considerable trauma. He writes that

[w]hen Jesus permanently moved away from his family, his 'roots,' he was thrust into a new drama on the public stage. He would learn the deeper meaning of the proverbial statement, 'You cannot go home again.' Geographical changes, a change of neighborhood, leave permanent effects in the way a person thinks and acts."²²

Within 4:15-16, the trauma associated with Jesus' withdrawal is immediately underscored by a prophecy citation. The citation, drawn from Isaiah 9:1-2, consists of the beginning of a poem declaring a new age and a new ruler, a promise of hope in the aftermath of displacement and defeat. Jesus' arrival in Capernaum is, accordingly, interpreted as the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise of deliverance, originally addressed to the devastated regions of northern Palestine

21. "κατοικέω," *BDAG* 425. The *nrsv* translation of κατοίκησεν in 4:13 as "made his home in," is problematic in that it fuels the illusion that Capernaum is a place of safety and stability for Jesus, and yet upon arrival he immediately begins an itinerant ministry. Other English translations are more restrained than the *NRSV*: the *KJV*, for example, says that Jesus "came and dwelt" there, and the *NIV* renders it as "he went and lived" there. Such translations grant the impermanence of Capernaum in its function as a home place for Jesus.

22. Paul Zilonka, "The Pain of Migration," *The Bible Today* 26, no. 6 (1991): 354.

of his day. The prophecy most likely concerns the historical situation described in 2 Kings 15:26 and 1 Chronicles 5:26, in which the Israelites from Naphtali are taken captive by the Assyrians during 733–32 BCE. The intertexture evokes the suffering that goes along with their deportation, but reconfigures it so as to associate Jesus with their hopes and desires of liberation. In the Isaiah text, a son from the house of David who brings salvation is promised (Isa. 9:6–7). In the Matthean text, this promise is applied to the ministry of Jesus, who, as a son from the house of David (Matt. 1:1), is retroactively heralded as a “liberated liberator.”²³ As we will see below, Jesus’ proclamation of the approaching kingdom extends this prospective for political dissent.

Heralding the Kingdom (Matt. 4:17)

Jesus’ ministry begins with a “light [which] has dawned” (v. 16). Awakening to the reality of his sociopolitical predicament, Jesus proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” His words not only echo the Baptist’s proclamation in 3:2, but mark the dawning of a messianic age. Jesus’ proclamation contains a sense of immediacy; beginning with an imperative to repent (μετανοεῖτε), and the inclusion of ἐγγίζω leading the second clause. This highlights the immanent closeness of the kingdom’s realization. As mentioned above, the adjoining text in verse 17, “From this time [ἀπὸ τότε],” connects the proceeding clause of the Baptist’s arrest to Jesus’ subsequent withdrawal. This disrupts the romanticization of Jesus’ break from home place as a lifestyle choice. Instead, the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is constructed narratively in the context of forced withdrawal; his proclamation is situated as a *response* to the intrusion of external political realities.

23. Elaine M. Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 101–18.

From a revolutionary perspective, the dawning of new light in the shadow of death (v. 16b) might evoke for the contemporary reader the Marxist concept of class consciousness. Georg Lukács argues that becoming conscious of one's concrete social position and its revolutionary potential changes being itself—that is, it transforms a passive working class into the proletariat as a revolutionary subject.²⁴ While in exile, Jesus becomes aware of his outsider status, which has occurred not because of individual moral or economic failure, but as a remnant of wider social and political forces and his God-given mission. The text retroactively transforms his abject social reality into a theological locus for organizing revolutionary power.

A Kingdom of the Heavens?

The phrase “Kingdom of the Heavens” (βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) occurs twenty-three times in Matthew and functions as an evocative and countercultural discourse of the prophetic imagination. The kingdom or *basileia* presents an alternative vision of reality, disrupting the Real (that is, the external dimension of experience as opposed to reality based on sense perception and the material order) that frames and sustains dominant arrangements of power in society and the totality of its alienating features. Within such a vision, the expendable homeless population, those at the very bottom of first-century society, are heralded a central place.

In his book *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, Jonathan Pennington discusses the meaning of the *basileia* within his wider thesis concerning Matthew's thematic use of heaven and earth. He argues that the *basileia*, which has a variety of meanings including but not limited to the rule or reign over a kingdom in a spatial sense,

24. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971).

is both from heaven and heavenly. This naturally contrasts with the counterpoint of earthly kingdoms and earthly ways of governance.²⁵ As such, the expression is used as part of the thematic contrast between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world.²⁶ Elaborating on the theology of the kingdom, Pennington remarks that Matthew

repeatedly shows that the social order of the kingdom of heaven is very unlike the present earthly order, and that the latter will eventually be replaced by the former (6:9–10). In addition to radical teachings . . . Matthew depicts the heavenly kingdom as one in which the mourning and poor in spirit are blessed (5:3, 4, 10–12), while those who are meek stand to inherit the earth (5:5). Equally topsy-turvy, the nature of the kingdom of heaven is such that the one who is lowly like a child will be the greatest therein (18:1–4; cf. 19:13–15), while the leaders in God's community should be the slaves of all (20:25–28; cf. 23:11). Those who give up everything for the heavenly kingdom will gain all back and more (19:26–29)—the first shall be last, and the last first (19:30).²⁷

Moreover, by proclaiming the *basileia* as a form of countercultural rhetoric, the subjects of the present ideological-political constellation are compelled to confront the fact that it exists, and exerts power, only insofar as it is accepted as such by its subjects.

An important contribution to the discussion of the meaning of the *basileia* as it pertains to the issues of home and homelessness is developed by Halvor Moxnes in his book *Putting Jesus in His Place*. Drawing on the field of critical spatial theory, in particular the works of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, Moxnes situates the kingdom within the category of “imaginary places,” which function as a vision of how a real place might be imagined differently. In

25. Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 328.

26. Pennington posits that “the ‘of heaven’ part . . . is not accidental or reverentially circumlocutionary, but serves a very powerful literary and rhetorical purpose: to contrast the world's kingdoms with God's.” *Ibid.*, 337–38.

27. *Ibid.*, 340.

his words, the kingdom opens up a “third-space” of representation or imagination that presents plans for alternative ways of structuring places and material practices from that of the ideologies dominated by the elite; it thus works as a poignant criticism of present conditions.²⁸ Moxnes further suggests that for those “who had been uprooted from their place of identity, the sayings about the kingdom . . . served to reinstate them in a location that could give them a new identity.”²⁹ One of the “imagined places” for the kingdom was located in the house and household. As we will see below, Jesus’ first disciples are dislocated from their households and become (up)rooted in a new social location among fictive kin.

What might this mean with respect to Jesus’ connection to homelessness? Aside from the homeless population functioning as a symptom of the reigning sociopolitical order, the conceptual spaces opened by the imaginary of the *basileia* facilitates the raising of questions about the objective violence that underscores social reality. In neoliberal societies, for example, the homeless are predominantly depicted as moral and economic failures, or worse, as victims incapable of effecting political change by themselves (without the help of the “more fortunate”). Similarly, in first-century Palestine, expendables, at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, were seen to lack intelligent or moral character and fell outside the purview of social responsibility.³⁰ According to Anthony J. Saldarini, the expendable class was for those whom society had no place or need. In a description that rings true of not only the modern homeless population but also the Matthean Jesus, he writes that expendables had been displaced for a variety of reasons including “population

28. Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 108–109.

29. *Ibid.*, 124.

30. Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 180–84.

pressures or [because] they did not fit into society. They tended to be landless and itinerant with no normal family life and a high death rate.”³¹ Although Jesus is associated with a family of artisans, he eventually descends the social ladder to occupy the socio-symbolic space of an expendable, and consequently is disposed of on the cross at Golgotha. Jesus’ public proclamation of the *basileia* challenges the fantasy that homelessness exists as a private, individualized responsibility. Rather, it exposes homelessness as a product of systemic violence inherent within existing arrangements of social and political power.

Who Should Repent?

Because Jesus’ proclamation involves the potential re-ordering of the wider ideological-political constellation, we ought to investigate the intended audience of Jesus’ injunction to repent. Within Matthew, I contend, “repentance” signifies not merely a private religious encounter, but rather a corporate activity of social and political transformation.

The verb μετανοέω (and its related noun form ἡ μετάνοια) in its basic sense describes the changing of one’s mind. It also conveys the idea of a total reorientation of behavior, “to feel remorse” and/or “to be converted” in a variety of relationships and in connection to varied responsibilities of the moral, political, social, and religious spheres.³² Contemporary theological understandings of repentance typically assume a *subjective* logic, with a focus on the individual. Because no specific character groups are designated by Jesus’ call to repent, the imperative tends to be read in generic ways that place the burden of responding to moral failure on individuals (inadvertently

31. Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 44.

32. “μετανοέω,” *BDAG* 640.

re-inscribing a neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility). With the exception of the generic proclamations in Matthew 3:2 and 4:17, however, the Matthean text only ever uses the verb in an *objective* sense (i.e., independent of a single conscious entity or subject).³³

Repentance as a theme is not as strong within Matthew as it is in Luke: *μετάνοια* occurs only twice (Matt. 3:8, 11) both times in relation to the Baptist (compared to five in Luke); *μετανοέω* occurs five times (compared to nine in Luke), once from the Baptist (3:2), and four times from Jesus (4:18; 11:20; 11:21; 12:41). The Baptist declares that the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism—scathingly referred to as a “brood of vipers!”—must “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (3:7–8). Jesus then continues in the tradition of the Baptist’s prophetic speech with his own proclamation in 4:17. W. D. Davies and Dale Allison write that “Israel is called to turn to God and away from sin, to arise in moral earnestness from a sinful slumber and to gain a wakeful heart and sober thought.”³⁴ Note here the corporate dimension: the call invokes all of Israel to change, including its social and political structures.

Similarly, the mention of repentance in 11:20–24 is also connected to corporate entities. On this occasion Jesus reproaches the cities (*πόλεις*) in which most of his deeds of power in Matthew 8–9 have taken place “because they did not repent.” The term *πόλις* denotes a population center of varying size. Within the Greco-Roman world the term generally held strong political associations, particularly in terms of the city-state. While in the ancient world most people did not live in cities, they were (like their modern equivalents) “the

33. Within Matthew, repentance is not a prerequisite for following Jesus. When Jesus goes about instructing pairs of individuals to follow him (chs. 18–22) he does not ask them to repent. As we will see, this strengthens the claim for understanding Matthean repentance as a corporate, political act, over and above an individual, moralistic act of piety.

34. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew 1–7*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 306.

centres where justice was administered, trade carried on, records kept, scribes trained, armies recruited, labour organized, power exercised.”³⁵ This implies that Jesus expected these centers of power to repent, in all their systemic and symbolic capacity, and by not doing so they open themselves to God’s wrath (11:23–24).³⁶ This corporate dimension to repentance is also found in the final Matthean occurrence of μετανοέω in 12:41. Jesus confronts Israel as a collective body and his condemnation of “this generation” can be likened to the Hebrew prophets’ theodicying about the generation sent into Babylonian exile.³⁷

As with the major Old Testament prophets, then, the Baptist and Jesus’ calls to repentance are based on the conviction that radical change must occur on a societal level. The prophets warned against systemic violence present within the religious, social, and political structures of ancient Israel (e.g., Jer. 23:3, 13–17; 21:11–12; Mic. 3:9–10, and so on). Repentance, for the Matthean text, appears to have more to do with the reorientation of these structures than with individual piety. This brings us back to the meaning produced by Jesus’ proclamation of the *basileia* if understood as a response to sociopolitical displacement: repentance in the Matthean text involves the turning away from sin and toward God of not merely *individuals* but rather *entire political systems*, including especially those city-states perpetuating asymmetrical social and economic relations.

35. J. W. Rogerson and John Vincent, *The City in Biblical Perspective* (London: Equinox, 2009), 4.

36. See especially G. E. M. Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 425–41. Ste. Croix argues that the historical Jesus was essentially a prophet of the *chora* and avoided the *polis* until his fatal trip to Jerusalem.

37. The biblical background to Jesus’ threats against these unrepentant cities is found in Isaiah and other prophetic writings. Jesus’ comparison of Chorazin and Bethsaida to the fates of Tyre and Sidon (11:21) echoes the oracle against these cities in Isa. 23:2–4 (cf. 23:12; Ezek. 28:1–26). Moreover, the link between Sodom and Capernaum in Matt. 11:23 evokes Isa. 1:9–10a, which calls on Sodom as an example of both a destroyed and sinful city with exploitative rulers. In both these examples the cities are judged collectively, in tandem with the holders of political office.

Forming an Alternative Community (Matt. 4:18-25)

The first action Jesus takes after heralding the *basileia* is to form a community of disciples. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls two pairs of fishermen to leave their boats and follow him. Barton notes how the emphasis on brothers (ἀδελφούς) in 4:18-22, repeated twice, links to the notion that following Jesus involves joining a community “best understood as a brotherhood.”³⁸ A comparison might be made to the contemporary homeless population that will often form small communities or networks that function as surrogates for family and home.

Analyzing the pericope through the social scientific model of collectivism and kinship, Louise Lawrence observes that

[t]he disciples illustrate an individualistic and personal decision that opts for a ‘universal’ collectivist goal rather than a concern for the nuclear ‘in-group’ alone as defined by the amoral familism model. In some ways, these brothers show individualistic traits, their attachments are not fixed. . . . This example shows that there is a certain synthesis between individualistic and collectivist traits in Matthew’s world.³⁹

In this respect, the call of the first disciples can potentially facilitate a neoliberal emphasis on homelessness as a “lifestyle choice” in the world before the text, requiring a careful reading against the grain. Conventional interpretations frequently construct 4:18-22 as a *model* of faithful conversion to Christian discipleship. Jesus goes about calling two pairs of brothers to leave their former lives and reorient themselves around him and the kingdom. Craig Keener, for instance, suggests that the purpose of 4:18-22 is to “demonstrate people’s proper response to God’s rule . . .” but more than this, the text “provides Matthew’s community [and by extension all Christians?]

38. Barton, *Discipleship*, 129.

39. Louise Lawrence, *An Ethnography of the Gospel of Matthew* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 241.

several examples of servant leadership and radical discipleship.”⁴⁰ Likewise, Davies and Allison claim the text “serves an aetiological function, for it recounts the acts whereby Jesus began to make men into missionaries. This means that we have before us the birth of the Christian mission. Also before us is the birth of the church, the decisive moment when people first threw in their lot with the cause of Jesus.”⁴¹

This paradigmatic framing of 4:18-22, no doubt influenced by dominant theological interests, however, can also function to unnecessarily obscure other possibilities of meaning. In fact, the application of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion reveals a glaring ideological inconsistency: the emphasis on only male disciples filters out women who do not feature here. As we will see below, the predominant focus on these characters as examples of faithful discipleship has meant that the text’s social and cultural texture have remained relatively underexplored.

Existing studies that attempt to accentuate the sociopolitical context of the text can also serve the interests of dominant ideologies. In his discussion of the ways in which 4:18-22 raises the issue of the disciples’ relationship to wider society, for example, Carter describes their characterization as “voluntary marginal.” He elaborates that this consists in their “choosing” to live a liminal existence in alternative households because of existing ideology, commitments, and visions of reality.⁴² In his commentary, Carter draws on the social scientific criticism of Dennis Duling to construct a binary of “voluntary marginality” versus “involuntary marginality.”⁴³ This construction,

40. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 149.

41. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 404.

42. Warren Carter, “Matthew 4:18-22 and Matthean Discipleship: An Audience-oriented Perspective,” *CBQ* 59, no. 1 (1997): 58-59.

43. Carter, *Margins*, 43-49; Dennis Duling, *A Marginal Scribe: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew in a Social-Scientific Perspective* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 125-28.

however, does not correspond to the reality that marginalization is always a dynamic process involving a combination of internal and external pressures and influences. While such models are intended to simplify, the lack of nuance and stark contrast between so called “voluntary” and “involuntary” categories functions to affirm the logic of neoliberalism: if marginality is voluntary, then the responsibility for its consequences lies with the individuals affected. Marginality in all its complexity always involves subjective, inter-subjective, and objective processes interacting with one another. Even purposeful or strategic ideologies and commitments that are marginal are always produced within a specific context. While it is reasonable to infer that by joining Jesus the disciples move further to the periphery, the implicit assumption among many interpreters is that these characters do not already occupy a marginal space. It is with this observation in mind that we explore the socioeconomic location of these characters in more detail. Accordingly, the label “in/voluntary” is employed below as a means of fragmenting these categories when discussing the disciples’ “decision” to join Jesus.

Fishing for Fishermen

Repetition indicates that the shared occupation of Jesus’ new followers is a major topic in the discourse of 4:18-22: the casting nets (τὰ δίκτυα) used to catch fish are mentioned three times; the occupation and activity of fishing appears twice (ἀλιεῖς); boat (πλοῖον/πλοῖον) is used twice; and the sea/lake (θάλασσαν) is mentioned twice. Furthermore, the word-play in verse 19 is generated by their occupation: Jesus declares that he “will make you fish for people.”⁴⁴

44. For a detailed study of this phrase, see Wilhem H. Wuellner, *The Meaning of “Fishers of Men”* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

Does the disciples' shared occupation as fishermen mean they enjoy relative economic security or perhaps even prosperity? Daniel Harrington, for example, suggests that "[i]n light of the importance of the fishing business at the Sea of Galilee it is clear that the first followers of Jesus were leaving behind a secure and stable lifestyle."⁴⁵ Similarly, in documenting the extensive and economically significant fishing industry of the Sea of Galilee, Keener deduces that by leaving their livelihood these first disciples are making a major economic sacrifice. He claims that successful fishermen, even if not high on the social scale, were far better off than the peasantry.⁴⁶ Such interpretations intend to heighten the dramatic sacrifice these characters make in following Jesus, thereby heightening their function as role models of individual discipleship.

Recent social scientific scholarship, however, has challenged the belief that fishermen were financially secure. In examining the fishing industry as a sub-system within the political and domestic economy of first-century Galilee, K. C. Hanson identifies the "relationships between the various players within the sub-system: the Roman Emperor; Herod Antipas; the tax administrators; the brokers, tax collectors, and toll collectors; the fishing families; the hired laborers; the suppliers of raw goods and other produces; fish processors; and shippers and carters."⁴⁷ Hanson cautions that although fishing was an important component of the Galilean economy, "it was not the 'free enterprise' which modern readers of the New Testament may imagine. Even fishers who may have owned their own boats were

45. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 72. Davies and Allison suggest that Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Zebedee appear to have belonged to the same fishing partnership which included a number of hired servants (cf. Mark 1:16-20; John 21:1-3). As such, they believe they were probably "from the (lower) middle class." Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 397.

46. Keener, *Matthew*, 151-53.

47. K. C. Hanson, "The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition," *BTB* 27, no. 3 (1997): 99.

part of a state regulated, elite-profiting enterprise, and a complex web of economic relationships” including heavy taxation that extracted wealth produced by the local industry and funneled it directly to support the lifestyle of projects of elite society.⁴⁸

Hanson points out that the economic structures of the ancient Mediterranean “were not independent systems with ‘free markets,’ free trade, stock exchanges, monetization, and the like, as one finds in modern capitalist systems.”⁴⁹ Rather, the mechanisms of the economy were structured in terms of the flow of benefits upward to the urban elites, and especially the ruling families (one might point out, of course, that the same is true within capitalism). We ought, therefore, to refrain from imagining individuals who “go to work;” rather their activity was embedded in various and complex domestic-economic and political-economic relationships including peasant families and households. Hanson forcefully argues that families of fishermen would fit broadly into the “peasant” strata of society and not in some kind of idealized and anachronistic “middle class.”

Given all this, we might ask to what extent the conditions of these disciples’ employment influence their “decision” to leave their livelihoods and to follow Jesus. At best, these fishermen have a precarious existence, marginal in economic security to landed peasants and the small minority of urban elites. It is not much of a stretch, then, to imagine a scenario in which their hardship would provoke them to abandon work and live as drifters, especially if they were heavily indebted. Indeed, the withdrawal of Jesus in 4:12 sets the scene for the in/voluntary withdrawal of the fishermen from their boats and from full participation in the reigning ideological-political order.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 100.

Another important observation is that by leaving their households and following Jesus, these first disciples move further to the margins of first-century Palestinian society. Given the context of an honor and shame saturated culture, the male disciples' dislocation from the household means that their identities as householders and/or sons of the household are strained. As Moxnes puts it, for Jesus and the disciples to be "without a house, in no-place, was therefore to be deprived of a role either as a householder, which given his age would have been his normal position, or as a son in a household."⁵⁰ Accordingly, their already precarious social standing within the wider socio-symbolic order is threatened. Moxnes points out that the call to discipleship narratives are about leaving a place of social identity that defines, secures, and structures one's identity. He continues, "The young male followers of Jesus had left their established, if inferior, position in the male world and were in a liminal situation."⁵¹ The withdrawal of the fishermen from their boats complements the withdrawal of Jesus following the arrest of the Baptist in verse 12. Just as Jesus is thrust to the outside, so too, the already marginal social statuses of the first disciples is exacerbated. An emphasis on this deviant aspect of their shared itinerancy potentially disrupts attempts at its romanticization. This inner group of followers represents the formation of an alternative community of displaced brothers, banded together as a surrogate home place or fictive kinship. Jesus features as the locus around which their revolutionary activity is mobilized; his vision of the *basileia* compels them into conscious in/voluntary action. The Matthean text is ardent to expand upon this early success of Jesus' challenge to the dominant ideological-political order, and so follows the call of the first disciples

50. Moxnes, *Jesus*, 96.

51. *Ibid.*

by narrating the positive reception of Jesus' call to action among the crowds.

An Itinerant Ministry Spreads

The final three verses of this text (4:23-25) provide an overview of Jesus' ministry activity within Galilee. His deeds include preaching the good news of the *basileia* and curing sickness among the people (cf. 9:35; 10:1). Jesus' withdrawal earns him fame among those located on, and sympathizers with, the margins of first-century Palestinian society. The reader is told that "[r]eports about him spread out into the whole of Syria." Moreover, "great crowds followed him," thus setting the scene for the Sermon on the Mount beginning in Matthew 5.

Matthew 4:23 includes the first use of εὐαγγέλιον (gospel/good news) in Matthew to summarize Jesus' message of the approaching *basileia*. But for whom is the "good news" intended? The above reading would suggest that Jesus' itinerant ministry offers hope of emancipation for those who are already dispossessed in some way; the revolutionary *basileia* he proclaims alludes to a vision of a more equitable social reality. In line with the prophetic stream of the Israelite tradition, those in positions of power, and institutions of power such as the πόλις (city), are ordered to "repent," to change their direction or face the consequences of cosmic destruction on the Day of Judgment.

The text describes the growth of Jesus' movement by identifying "great crowds" following him from Galilee but also from centers of power including Jerusalem and the Decapolis (ten cities). The emphasis on centers of power indicates a fervent and widespread movement of withdrawal from normalized society and suggests growth of a countercultural resentment that can be traced back to the

instability of these ruling political institutions. This narration of mass withdrawal amplifies Jesus' own displacement as symptomatic of the smooth functioning of the wider sociopolitical order.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered how Jesus' apparent decision to begin an itinerant ministry is, in fact, precipitated by external crises, most prominently, the arrest of John the Baptist. In Matthew 3, the Baptist appears on the outside in the wilderness, dispensing prophetic speech and acts and drawing great crowds out to him from the urban centers. By the end of Matthew 4, Jesus is having a similar influence, but on a much greater scale. While the disciples, introduced in verses 18–22, serve as an inner-circle to Jesus, the crowds in verses 23–25 add an outer periphery to his itinerant network.

The external sociopolitical realities of Jesus' predicament are internalized in the character of Jesus as he engages his wider ideological-political environment. After withdrawing to Galilee Jesus publically announces the *basileia*—an imaginary space in which the symbolic order of society is reversed. Within this restructuring, displaced subjects, like Jesus, are afforded honor and uplifting, whereas the elite and retainers of the status quo are dishonored and dethroned. The vision is accompanied by an injunction to repent, not directed at individual men and women, but rather to the entire ideological-political constellation. Such prophetic dissent unsettles the sensibilities of the normalized population, and Jesus will ultimately be suppressed through lethal violence.

Jesus' first disciples are fishermen who abandon their fishing boats and their livelihoods to follow him. Their withdrawal is not arbitrary, but rather is integrated with their occupation and class struggle as it is encoded within the text. An emphasis on the socioeconomic realities specific to the fishing industry in first-century Palestine adds much

needed complexity to the disciples' in/voluntary decision to leave the house and/or household structure.

As we have seen, some of the prevailing contemporary concerns of neoliberal ideology can both influence and limit biblical interpretation. Rather than presenting Jesus and his first disciples as individual, free-roaming, moral agents, able to make isolated economic choices, the Matthean text embeds these characters within a wider social and political context within which they are in constant negotiation. Far from "choosing" to become homeless and begin an itinerant ministry, Jesus is already a displaced and uprooted subject. The text, accordingly, gestures towards external sociopolitical realities that become internalized in Jesus as an experience of perpetual uprooting and displacement.