

# Probing the Homelessness of Jesus with Žižek's Sublime Object

Robert J. Myles, University of Auckland

*In this article I use the critical tools of Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek to probe the homelessness of Jesus via a close inspection of Mt 8: 18-22. My analysis is limited to the Jesus simulacrum<sup>1</sup> in the Gospel of Matthew, whose experience of homelessness is perhaps the most complicated of any of the gospels. Matthew's Jesus experiences multiple displacements and rejection from home place (see esp. 2: 13-23; 4: 12; 13: 53-58), but is uniquely connected to a house and/or household (οἶκος/οἰκία) in Capernaum (cf. 9: 10, 28; 12: 46; 13: 1, 36; 17: 25), a detail absent from Mark, Luke, and John. In briefest outline, the article begins with a discussion of the problem of ideology, biblical scholarship, and Jesus' apparent homelessness, using Žižek's sublime object to probe some of the ideological cracks, before turning to a closer inspection of Mt 8: 18-22, as the issue of homelessness protrudes behind, within, and in front of the text.*

## 1. IDEOLOGY, HOMELESSNESS, AND JESUS THE BUM

Although a connection between Jesus and homelessness is often made at the level of popular culture and also in much of the scholarly literature, an investigation into both the ideological and interpretive ramifications of such a connection remains underexplored. Many depictions of this apparent connection tend to romanticize Jesus' itinerancy in a way that divorces it from the marginalizing reality of homelessness and the reduced capacity for agency that homeless persons typically possess. Moreover, binary constructs continue to pervade our thinking on homelessness, particularly when it comes to Jesus, whether it is the opposition of: (1) home/homelessness – apparently one can only dwell in a single category at any one point in time; (2) the conflation of the terms house/home – is a house really the same as a home?; or (3) the simulated divide between the individual/society – who is the real cause of homelessness? (Does the responsibility, as it were, lie with the individual affected or is there a wider context that must also be taken into account?) These binary oppositions are not the easiest to disrupt. Using some of the critical tools of Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, however, I will demonstrate how the Jesus simulacrum of Matthew's gospel is able to do just that. This is achieved, first, by some gentle ideological prodding of the connection between Jesus and homelessness in contemporary scholarship. I then move to a closer inspection of Matthew 8: 18-22, in order to discern how ideologies of homelessness not only shape the interpretation of the text, but also open the possibility for new readings.

My framework for probing the homelessness of Jesus is informed primarily by the ideological politics of homelessness as they circulate around the world in front of the text. I am using the contested term "ideology" here in its typical Marxist formulation(s) – not necessarily to denote a "false consciousness", but rather, as Terry Eagleton describes it, to express "the ways in which what

we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in ... those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (Eagleton 2008: 13). Moreover, if we are to assume, in line with Žižek, that the primary function of ideology is not to make correct theoretical statements or interpretive judgments about political reality, but rather to orient subjects’ lived relations to and within this reality, then ideologies about homelessness are materialized within institutions and people’s everyday practices and lives (Žižek 1989: 15-16).

In a recent article exploring the “Problem of Ideology in Biblical Studies”, Randal Reed (2011) suggests that the work of Žižek might open a new space for ideological biblical criticism, without having to try and find some (imagined) place outside of ideology. According to Žižek, all successful political ideologies refer to extra-political *sublime objects* that posit to its subjects what the central words or concepts of an ideology mean. While these objects ultimately fail to reveal the full truth of their signification, this failure itself is seen as indirect testimony to the supreme quality of the object. Borrowing the language of Jacques Lacan, Žižek suggests these things are “Real”, precisely insofar as they stand out from the reality of ordinary things and events. Reed makes sense of Žižek’s thought (which, to be fair, is far-ranging, eclectic, and at times seemingly contradictory) as follows:

Reality as we know it is not a totality, it is replete with gaps and holes. That lack of totalization is true even more so for ideology. There are in ideology also gaps and holes. Ideology often tries to pre-emptively fill these holes but they are always there ... The failure to properly symbolize the real means that there is always a remnant or supplement, which is part of the real that escapes ideology. Those pieces of the real that exist in ideology and yet elude it are then the places that create the possibility for ideological criticism. (Reed 2011: 23)

These gaps and holes, when exploited, reveal the contradictions inherent within all ideological systems. To anticipate the argument below, in the case of Jesus and homelessness, for example, we get a seemingly “romantic” or “idyllic” form of homelessness without any of the negative side-effects that usually accompany the experience. There is no meth addiction, for example, or any actual loss of agency or social-power. Homelessness is sublimely idealized in Jesus in a way that encourages us to divert our attention from the social and political questions that should really be plaguing us: namely, why do some people become homeless? And more pointedly, how is the wider socioeconomic and ideological-political system complicit in the construction and marginalization of the homeless population? To use a favourite analogy of Žižek, the homelessness of Jesus is a case of interpreters having their cake and eating it too.

Žižek describes the homeless population in contemporary society (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” (Žižek 1997: 161-162). Could we not also view Jesus’ homelessness as a symptom? Not, of course, as a direct result of capitalism (I would prefer to avoid charges of anachronism), but rather as a product of the systematic and structural failures of the socio-political context of first century Palestine and Galilee. Despite scholars’ intense focus on the world behind the text (including social-scientific approaches that attempt to place Jesus in his social and cultural milieu), interpretations of the Jesus simulacra tend to separate the causes of their apparent homelessness from their wider social and cultural context as it is encoded within the text. This is surprising given our knowledge of the significant social upheavals and displacement within first century Palestine in addition to the pervasive impact of Roman imperialism on subject populations, and so on, that eventually resulted in full-scale revolts against Rome.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Matthew’s Jesus, an emphasis on marginality has been applied more to the Matthean community

who produced the text, than to the character of Jesus himself.<sup>3</sup> At most, Jesus might have experienced marginalization from political and religious leaders and institutions, but his homelessness is regarded first and foremost as an extension of his God-given identity and mission.

As a result of these interpretive oversights, conventional interpretations tend to perpetuate dominant ideologies about the causes of homelessness that plague present-day discourse. Given our shared ideological climate of postmodernism, otherwise known as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson 1991), most interpretations will implicitly evoke neoliberal assumptions about the centrality of the individual as a free-roaming economic agent.<sup>4</sup> Within such a framework, homelessness is understood as the result of an individual's (poor) economic and moral choices. The wider context, which in today's terms might include the dismantling of the welfare state, trends towards social disintegration, the privatization of social and governmental agencies, is, generally speaking, seen as unimportant to understanding the rise and plight of homeless populations. One can see, for example, how these ideological assumptions creep into Ulrich Luz's description of a popular view of Christian origins (in regards to the mission discourse in Mt 10):

Palestinian Christianity originated as a movement of itinerant radicalism. Its roots go back to Jesus; the disciples he called to follow him and to witness to the imminent kingdom of God as he did shared his style of life and were poor and homeless. They gave up their jobs and their family for the time they were together with Jesus. After their master's death many of them continued this way of life. (Luz 1994: 44)

This way of framing Christian origins feeds from the dominant discourse within neoliberalism that homelessness results from "lifestyle" choices made arbitrarily by an individual. Absent is any discussion of the hostile political structures that may have contributed to these instances of itinerancy. It also re-narrates the common myth or "type" of the itinerant religious man who piously foregoes worldly possessions. The vocational framing tends to romanticize and thus obscure a number of textures within the text that indicate, or might indicate, forced displacement, or take account of psychological and social factors that can pre-empt episodes of homelessness. Because Jesus is the hero of the story, and so can hardly be characterized as a moral or economic failure, his characterization as the "homeless one" becomes idealized as a sublime object. Jesus functions as an example (if not the primary example) of voluntary homelessness; he foregoes (or sacrifices) the comforts of home and household out of his pious convictions and allegiance to God. In a move of convenient compartmentalization, the desperation and destitution that typically accompany experiences of homelessness is negated. The homelessness of Jesus, then, functions as what Žižek refers to as the *objet petit a*; its mediation of "surplus enjoyment" (*plus de jouissance*) acts as a fantasmatic screen to shield us from the traumatic experience of homelessness proper and the apparent failure of the wider socio-political environment in which it manifests.

## 2. OBJECTIVE VIOLENCE AND MATTHEW'S JESUS

To go about disrupting this ideological illusion of stability and wholeness, I attempt to re-read Matthew's Jesus in a way that foregrounds the trauma associated with homelessness, both political and personal. If Jesus' homelessness is best understood as a symptom of wider structural and systematic failures, then we also need to take greater account of its relationship to the ideological-political system in which the Matthean text embeds its Jesus simulacrum. In his treatise on violence, Žižek (2008) distinguishes between two broad categories of violence in the world: first, *subjective violence* is the more visible form in which violence is performed by a clearly identifiable agent; second, *objective violence* 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—the exploitation of individuals and groups inherent within the “normal” functioning of society. According to Žižek, all ideological-political systems are founded on and sustained by such acts of violence.

The Jesus simulacrum in Matthew’s gospel experiences a number of episodes of forced displacement or homelessness that are the result of objective violence. For example, the story of his birth (2: 13-23; cf. 4: 12; 14: 13) is entwined with multiple displacements, first to Egypt and then to Nazareth, and tells the story of a helpless infant subjected to the aggressive politics of the ruling elite. The extravagant gifting by the magi in 2: 1-11 forms a dramatic contrast to the response of Herod who, upon realizing their deceit, lashes out in violent terror. As an infant, Jesus possesses no agency and is entirely reliant on the actions of others for his survival. The fact that Jesus never returns to his original home place (which in Matthew is Bethlehem) but instead is displaced to the Galilean town of Nazareth out of fear (ἐφοβήθη) of Herod’s son, Archelaus, means that he grows up in exile, dislocated from his original home place as a two-time refugee. While conventional depoliticized readings of 2: 13-23 concern themselves with the text’s construction of Jesus as the Messiah, the new Moses, and fulfilment of prophecy (themes not entirely absent, but arguably over-emphasized), the episode also disrupts dominant interpretations of Jesus’ homelessness as entirely voluntary. In noticing the deficiencies with conventional interpretations of the infancy narratives, Richard A. Horsley (1989), for example, has attempted to reclaim this text as it portrays a particular network of socio-political relationships. Herod is supported by an extensive institutional apparatus that enables him to pose a real threat against Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, and to enact his fantasies of infanticide with disturbing ease. The obvious acts of subjective violence, such as the infanticide, are only enabled by layers of entrenched objective, systemic violence within the Herodian and Roman political machinery.

Indeed, Matthew’s entire story of Jesus is set against this backdrop of objective violence. The identification of Jesus as a potential challenge to Herod in 2: 13-23 is a foretaste of Jesus’ ultimate fate—his eventual death on the cross. Jesus’ move to Capernaum (4: 12-13) is also an episode of displacement that occurs directly after hearing of John the Baptist’s arrest. Upon returning to teach in his so-called “home town” (πατρίς) in 13: 53-58, Jesus is met with rejection and disbelief.

When read as a manifestation of underlying objective violence, the passion narrative (26-28) takes on a more nuanced meaning. While crucifixion features as a visual externalization of Rome’s power, it is only made possible through the collusion of an entire system of violent structures and institutions. In drawing greater attention to the symptom (a criminal being executed), however, the rest of the population is encouraged to avert its gaze from the underlying objective violence (or disease) that contributed to this situation in the first place. By removing a perceived disturbance, society is able to return to its smooth, uninterrupted functioning. It is with this ideological backdrop of objective violence in mind that I move to a closer inspection of Mt 8: 18-22, as the issue of homelessness protrudes behind, within, and in front of the text.

### 3. NOWHERE TO LAY HIS HEAD?

Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’ (Mt 8: 18-22 NRSV)

Mt 8: 18-22 features as an interlude to Jesus' healings and deeds of power in the surrounding chapters. The well-known text contains two parallel scenes depicting brief exchanges between Jesus and two would-be followers. The first involves an eager scribe who approaches Jesus and inquires about following him. Jesus' response is rather cryptic and does not directly answer the scribe's question. In the second scene, a man who is already a disciple of Jesus asks if he can first go and bury his dead father before following. This time Jesus' response is more direct although still confusing: "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead".

In this analysis I start with the central statement spoken by Jesus ("Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head") before gauging how the surrounding verses function to amplify the expression. At first sight, Jesus' words in verse 20 appear to evoke a sense of helplessness or inevitability surrounding his itinerant predicament (a predicament that is presumably also shared by those who travel with him). The phrase "nowhere to lay his head" indicates not only his desire to secure rest and refuge, but also evokes a feeling of restlessness in the text's sensory-aesthetic texture. The mention of foxes might allude to the political elite: "Suetonius calls the greedy Vespasian a fox. Herod is called a fox in Lk 13: 32, and the birds of the air are Gentiles in [Mt] 13: 32" (Carter 2000: 207). If so, Jesus here compares his alternative, marginal existence with the security of the settled elite.

The peculiar expression "Son of Man" has continued to receive a lot of scholarly attention in recent years (cf. Casey 2007, Hurtado and Owen 2011). It likely contains a Hebrew or Aramaic background, and is possibly multi-layered in its meaning with both theological and political connotations. While typically understood to be self-referential, that is, as a substitute for the personal pronoun "I", the expression might also stand for humankind generally, or for a particular subset of society ("a person in my situation"). Davies and Allison suggest that the expression's appearance in 8: 20 probably functions in a titular sense; "the saying contains much irony. The one without a home is the majestic judge of mankind. Hence we have the ultimate illustration of the first being last" (Davies and Allison 1991: 52). Alternatively, if the expression "Son of Man" refers to Jesus' humanity in a more general sense, then it also comes across as ironic: during the Sermon of the Mount (Mt 5-7), Jesus asserts that even the birds of the air are provided for, and so the crowds need not worry about securing food (6: 26). Jesus comforts his audience with the rhetorical question, "Are you not of more value than they?" In 8: 20, however, it appears that the Son of Man has descended in value to below that of the birds. As Brawley puts it, Jesus' "homelessness is presented as a fact of life that substantiates his existence on the margins of subsistence" (Brawley 2011).

Within popular interpretation, Mt 8: 20 is regularly proof-texted as a demonstration of Jesus' supposed homelessness or itinerant "lifestyle". In his commentary on Matthew, John Nolland (2005, 366), however, objects that Jesus cannot possibly be homeless because he is connected to a house at various points in the gospel (a detail unique to Matthew, cf. 9: 10, 28; 12: 46; 13: 1, 36; 17: 25) and because Jesus and the disciples are expected to be provided with temporary lodging during their travels (10: 12-14). Nolland's reasoning assumes that houselessness means the same thing as homelessness, which, as we will see below, is guided by a modern fusion of the concepts of "house" and "home". A similar semantic muddle undergirds an influential article by Jack Dean Kingsbury (1988), who suggests that we should not regard 8: 20 as referring to "literal homelessness", but rather a "metaphorical homelessness" that shares many of the qualities of not having a home. While this clarification might at first appear helpful, it is potentially misleading.<sup>5</sup> The distinction feeds from and into the romanticization of Jesus' homelessness, for the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical assumes priority for the "literal" which is considered closer to reality, whereas a "metaphorical" homelessness is not directly connected to tangible economic and political factors, and so is treated as less serious. Accordingly, the desperation of Jesus' homelessness is extracted

and becomes an interpretive gap ripe for Žižekian exploitation. Indeed, the interpretation that Jesus is not “literally” homeless is framed by assumptions about what constitutes a “home” in the first place. Are we talking here about a structure that serves as a place of residence, or do we have in mind a concept related to space and place, with more of an emphasis on social identity and meaningful relationships? Both definitions can be tied to socioeconomic factors and so the literal versus metaphorical distinction seems rather unhelpful.

I want to flesh out this issue a little more with the help of the adage “a house is not the same as a home”. This is because it seems that Nolland and Kingsbury unknowingly equate the term “house”, which generally designates a structure used primarily for residential purposes, and “home”, which signifies a more complex and nuanced entity in which a person or group of people are connected to a particular place by a sense of a relational social and spatial identity. While a house will often function as a home, it is possible to speak about home as place without the need for a physical structure, the house. In reckoning with the relationship between home and being, for example, Martin Heidegger reverses the common assumption that homemaking necessarily begins with a physical structure. Rather, he suggests that “[w]e do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*” (Heidegger 1971: 148). In other words, Heidegger thinks that our building activities—which consist of the founding and joining of both material and/or imaginary spaces—are integrally associated with and arise out of our innate capacity to dwell, to transform (meaningless) space into home place.<sup>6</sup>

The conflation of the terms “house” and “home” in common English occurred in the seventeenth century during which the rise of the capitalist class led to a form of “domestic morality” aimed at safeguarding and privatising familial property; this soon became solidified in English case law when the terms began to be used interchangeably (Rykwert 1991, cf. Mallett 2004). In his book dealing with the figure of the historical Jesus from the perspectives of space and place, Halvor Moxnes briefly draws our attention to how these cultural changes have even had an impact on English translations of the Bible. Over the centuries translators have increasingly rendered οἶκος/οἰκία as “home”, interchangeably with “house” and “household”, even though such a conflation is difficult to establish within the biblical text. As he puts it, “[i]n many instances this gives a ‘homey’ feeling—it reflects a modern, stereotypical use of ‘home’ even when it is not appropriate” (Moxnes 2003: 26). While the terms are now used interchangeably, most people can still recognize a distinction between a house and a home.

This distinction is best seen to play out in the Australian, low-budget, comedy film *The Castle* (1997), in which a blue collar family man, Darryl Kerrigan (Michael Caton), is threatened by the compulsory acquisition of his family house for the expansion of the neighbouring Melbourne Airport. Undergirding Kerrigan’s motivation to fight the eviction is his strong belief, repeated a number of times through the film, that “It’s not a house, it’s a home”. What the film is really about, then, is not so much the David versus Goliath sub-plot that sets simple-man Kerrigan against the objective violence of the big government, but rather Darryl’s innate fear of the semantic collapse of the terms “house” and “home”. From the government’s perspective, Darryl could make his home wherever he chooses; they see his house simply as a house. Kerrigan’s distinction, however, gestures towards the surplus enjoyment he associates with his house. When a government appraiser inspects the house, for example, Kerrigan points out all of its faults with pride, believing that they will add value. Although, for him, it is *more than* a house, it is also *less than* a house, which is what effectively makes it a home.

Such a distinction also goes in reverse: one can have a house, but it may *not* function as a home. So while Jesus might be connected to a house in Capernaum, or have accommodation, and so on, he does not necessarily have a home, at least not for the entirety of Matthew’s gospel. Recall that for

Matthew's Jesus, home place was originally Bethlehem (2: 1). Kingsbury's interpretation, that Jesus is not "literally" homeless, is problematic in that it not only ignores the wider literary context of Jesus' ministry as itinerant, but also fails to incorporate episodes of forced displacement such as the flight to Egypt (2: 13-23), or Jesus' flight to Capernaum directly after hearing of the arrest of John the Baptist (4: 12-13). Like all conceivable elements of identity, then, Jesus' homelessness includes an element of non-identity.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the distinction between "house" and "home", as well as the divide between having a "home" and/or being "homeless", are fractured by the observation that Matthew's Jesus is both connected to a house and/or household (οἶκος/οἰκία), but is also at times homeless with nowhere to lay his head. A housed, homeless one challenges essentialist definitions of homelessness that reduce the phenomenon to the rather obscure (and Western, capitalist) category of simply "having a house". Jesus' lament in 8: 20, therefore, traverses any literal versus metaphorical distinction: his homelessness is both, and yet it is also neither.

#### 4. WOULD-BE DISCIPLES

At this point I want to take a step back and inspect the verses surrounding Jesus' central statement, in order to observe how they amplify Jesus' claim of "having nowhere to lay his head". Verse 18 describes Jesus giving orders to a great crowd to "go over to the other side" of the lake. In verse 19 the character of the scribe is introduced. We know the scribe only by his occupation and his desire to follow Jesus wherever he goes. The use of the verb "to follow" (ἀκολουθέω) is repeated twice in 8: 18-22 and is generally understood as an action of discipleship (cf. 4: 20-25; 9: 9; 10: 38; 16: 34). But the text also makes sense in terms of literal travel from one place to another. Jesus' response to the scribe likewise makes sense in terms of travel: it implies that Jesus has no determined point of orientation; his travel is precarious and restless.

Moreover, because the scribe likely benefits from his social status, as a member of the retainer class (Saldarini 2001), the restlessness of which Jesus speaks is something he cannot fully comprehend, let alone choose to imitate. If someone from an elite social stratum chooses to descend the socioeconomic ladder, this does not mean they will necessarily share in the experiences and outlook of those on a lower rung. For a crude analogy we might imagine a charitable celebrity sleeping rough for a weekend as part of a publicity stunt. No matter how well-intentioned, his or her experience will never correlate to the psychological impact of knowing that week after week one will be impoverished and disenfranchised. While the scribe seems sincere in his desire to follow Jesus, Jesus' response makes it clear that travel from one destination to the next with no expectation of rest or refuge is not to be romanticized.

The request of the second would-be disciple, to go and bury his father, evokes meaning on at least two levels. On the one hand, the disciple wants to fulfil his familial duties by returning to his home place and attending to his father's corpse. On the other hand, the disciple seeks to "bury" his remaining ties to his father.<sup>8</sup> Jesus' hyperbolic response "let the dead bury their own dead", implores the primacy and immediacy of following Jesus. It is highly unlikely that dead people would be able to bury other dead people, and so a common interpretation is that Jesus is referring to the "spiritually dead" (Davies and Allison 1991: 56, France 2007: 330). However, a text does not have to make perfect sense for it to evoke some kind of meaning. Nolland cautions that "[t]o introduce the idea of a category of spiritually dead people is to add a new thought that has no clear links with the context" (Nolland 2005: 368). Perhaps there is a perceived danger in returning to home place once these familial ties are severed (cf. 13: 53-58). Again, Jesus' response brings attention to the necessary hardship of an itinerant existence.

As a result, the two exchanges within 8: 18-22 are typically understood as demonstrating the cost associated with following Jesus. Such a reading is exemplified by Carter (2000), who suggests the pericope emphasizes the theme that “the hardship and uncompromising cost of discipleship as a marginal and countercultural existence ... shape[s] the audience’s identity and lifestyle as followers of Jesus” (207). Jesus’ response in the second exchange suggests that followers of Jesus are to prioritize their association with him and what has been called Jesus’ “fictive kinship” above the obligations one might have to biological kin or responsibilities within one’s original household. Stephen Barton, for example, connects this pericope to the call to discipleship text in Mt 4: 12-25 (and counterpart texts in Mark) in light of the dissolution of family ties. He observes that the custom of filial piety and association with conventional household structures is subordinated to the greater obligation of discipleship. A link is drawn between the brothers leaving their father and the command to leave the dead to bury the disciple’s father in 8: 22 (Barton 1994: 130). The disciples, and of course Jesus, distance themselves from their respective households, thereby exacerbating their status as social deviants. This correlates to modern-day constructions of the homeless population as deviants, perceived as a threat to the sensibilities of the more normalized population, for their very existence confronts the objective violence inherent within the ideological-political system. Jesus explicitly states his perceived dislocation from biological kin in Mt 12: 46-50 during which he redefines the boundaries of his family (his mother and brothers on the “outside”, contrasted with Jesus and “those who do the will of the father” on the inside), and then this comes back to confront him in 13: 53-58, when Jesus is rejected by the people of his home town.

While dominant interpretations are right to stress the hardship of itinerancy, an exploitable gap is left open by the framing of this hardship as an attitude or chosen way of life, advocated by Jesus and arbitrarily adopted by his disciples. As noted above, dominant interpretations of Jesus’ (and others’) homelessness will often re-inscribe neoliberal narratives about individual moral and economic agency. However, such a heightened view of agency is not always supported by the Matthean text, which often signals social, cultural, and political barriers limiting the range of possible choices. While episodes of Jesus’ homelessness are predominantly contingent on the actions and reactions of other characters and ideological-political institutions, it is difficult to make similar judgments for his disciples, given the dearth of details. On the one hand, for instance, Jesus’ disciples do not always choose to become followers, but rather it is Jesus who chooses them (cf. 4: 18-22; 9: 9). On the other hand, Jesus does recognize that some disciples have made significant sacrifices in joining him, and promises them eschatological reward (cf. 19: 16-30).

In assessing the agency of the two would-be disciples in 8: 21-22, then, it is useful to probe what capacity these characters really have in their “decision” to become homeless given their likely social and psychological predispositions. On the problem of free will, Žižek frequently refers to a “totalitarian disavowal” in the suspension of ideological belief. Essentially, the more we believe that we operate as independent thinkers and actors, have free choice, and so on, the more we blind ourselves to external ideologies that submit us to the wider socio-political order. In liberal Western societies, for example, subjects are encouraged to take a cynical distance from traditional ideological belief, which effectively suggests they are already caught in the system’s ideological loop, such as the logic of the free-market. While Žižek does not deny the existence of free will, he does emphasize how it’s very notion functions as a supremely effective ideological formula (Žižek 1989).

A similar disavowal takes place in the interpretation of this text in the way that the prospective disciples’ agency is heightened. This projection occurs as a result of both the ambiguity surrounding Jesus’ response to the scribe (20), and the vacuity of details about the second would-be disciple, his social status, or his identity. What we do know about the second man, however, is that his father has recently passed away. Within the Greco-Roman world the father would generally function as the head of the household, looking after its economic affairs and managing the provisions for the wider

kin group. If this disciple were the eldest male, it would be his duty to assume responsibility for the affairs of the household, hence his desire to return “home” and tend to his father’s burial (cf. Tob 4: 3; 6: 15). What can be deduced from the text, then, is that this disciple’s judgments are likely shaped by these emotional and economic pressures. Indeed, the man is divided between his intention to continue to follow Jesus and the social and cultural expectations surrounding the burial of his father. His split identity is challenged by Jesus’ hard-hitting response that the dead should be left to bury themselves. Social and cultural obligations become secondary when one is already marginalized in the economically and socially desperate situation of itinerancy.

This leads me to an anecdote Žižek employs to illustrate his notion of the “forced choice”. He recalls the story of a Yugoslav student called to regular military service in which, at the beginning of one’s service, a certain ritual is performed:

[E]very new soldier must solemnly swear that he is willing to serve his country and to defend it even if it means losing his life, and so on—the usual patriotic stuff. After the public ceremony, everybody must sign the solemn document. The young soldier simply refused to sign, saying that an oath depends upon free choice, that it is a matter of free decision, and he, from his free choice, did not want to give his signature to the oath. But, he was quick to add, if any of the officers present was prepared to give him a formal order to sign the oath, he would of course be prepared to do so. The perplexed officers explained to him that because the oath depended upon his free decision (an oath obtained by force is valueless), they could not give him such an order, but that, on the other hand, if he still refused to give his signature, he would be prosecuted for refusing to do his duty and condemned to prison. (Žižek 1989: 185)

Žižek perceives that:

[i]n the subject’s relationship to the community to which he belongs, there is always such a paradoxical point of *choix forcé*—at this point, the community is saying to the subject: you have freedom to choose, but on condition that you choose the right thing; you have, for example, the freedom to choose to sign or not to sign the oath, on condition that you choose rightly—that is, to sign it. If you make the wrong choice, you lose freedom of choice itself. And it is by no means accidental that this paradox arises at the level of the subject’s relationship to the community to which he belongs: the situation of the forced choice consists in the fact that the subject must freely choose the community to which he belongs, independent of his choice—he must choose what is already given to him. (Žižek 1989: 186)

In the case of Mt 8: 18-22, the scribe is denied his free choice by Jesus. The desperation and destitution that goes along with homelessness cannot be shared by someone occupying the privileged status of a scribe within the ideological-political order. The second man, however, is “already a disciple”. His first choice has already been made. Jesus’ command not to return to home place and bury his father is riddled with the pretension and paradox of forced choice: the disciple is given the freedom to choose to bury his (relationship to his) father, but his father is already dead, and so his ties to his father are already buried. In the eyes of wider society, though, he has no choice but to choose to fulfil his cultural and familial obligations.

By choosing to ignore these cultural obligations, and continuing to follow Jesus, his split from normalized society, and its associated stigmatization, is exacerbated. But if he chooses to bury his father’s corpse, his relationship to Jesus and the community of disciples is strained. Of these two options presented to the disciple, either selection results in estrangement from kin, whether biological or fictive. Does it really make sense, then, to speak of his dislocation from home place as a

choice? As with Jesus' apparent homelessness, the text provides details that problematize the interpretive trend to heighten agency within such a structured environment. As such, it underscores the role that neoliberal discourse probably has in influencing the hermeneutical filters of contemporary exegetes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

At this point we come full circle in our probing of the connection between Jesus and homelessness. This article has raised a number of questions surrounding this connection both generally and within the interpretation of Mt 8: 18-22 in particular. The dominant trend to regard Jesus and the disciples' apparent homelessness as voluntary is in some ways challenged by this text but in other ways reinscribed. While Jesus' lament of homelessness in verse 20 appears to be discouraging the scribe from following, the man who is already a disciple is told in the midst of a family tragedy that he must let remaining family obligations and responsibilities bury themselves. This emphasis on the dissolution of family ties, combined with the restlessness of itinerancy, both appear to provide narrative amplification for the characterization of Matthew's Jesus as the homeless one.

A gentle prodding of the ideology surrounding the connection between Jesus and homelessness reveals the surplus of meaning generated by the limits of signification. Framing Jesus and the disciples' apparent homelessness as a "way of life", an "attitude", or "voluntary", for example, echoes the dominant neoliberal framing of homelessness in contemporary society. Understood as a symptom, however, Jesus' homelessness points to the objective violence already encoded within the text. Moreover, it begins to fracture the romanticization of Jesus' homelessness in the world before the text by provoking us to think critically about yet another place in which biblical interpretation is entwined with ideological assumptions.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I adopt this term from George Aichele (2011: esp. 24-45), who, drawing on the theory of Gilles Deleuze, argues that we ought to take the Jesuses of the four gospels seriously as distinct simulacra rather than reduce them to variant copies of a single historical model or archetypal entity (as is the common practice in biblical studies).

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Brawley's recent article goes against the grain of this trend when he addresses the homelessness of the historical Jesus as translating to the loss of access to the resources of the land. Keeping the Roman imperial occupation of Galilee in purview, he concludes that "[e]vidence of Jesus' status as an artisan who experienced downward mobility from landed peasantry indicates that far from his preferred choice, his homelessness was a fact of life for which he had no option" (Brawley 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The work of Warren Carter (2000; 2001), for example, constructs the Matthean community as a marginal community in tension with the synagogue and advocating a marginal existence in the face of Roman imperialism. Despite an intense focus on Jesus' negotiation of Roman imperial power, Carter contends that Jesus' homelessness is primarily the result of his "voluntary marginality" (Carter 2000: 208). cf. Duling, who constructs the author of Matthew as a "voluntary marginal" scribe (Duling 2011: 144).

<sup>4</sup> James G. Crossley (2012), for one, has demonstrated how the discourse of neoliberalism, as the socioeconomic and ideological-political context of scholarship over the last forty years, has been seriously understated in discussions of ideology and New Testament studies.

<sup>5</sup> Kingsbury's distinction is problematic not only on ideological grounds but also historical and literary-critical grounds. Maurice Casey, for instance, challenges Kingsbury for proceeding with the assumption that the question is whether Jesus ever lived in a house, a question "which ignores the context of migratory ministry" (Casey 2007: 176-77). Casey's refutation of Kingsbury's argument is partially the result of a clash of

methodologies, but nonetheless reveals some of the creative (mis)reading that undergirds Kingsbury's distinction.

<sup>6</sup> On the problem of homelessness, Heidegger writes towards the end of his essay: "On all sides we hear talk about the housing shortage, and with good reason... We try to fill the need by providing houses, by promoting the building of houses, planning the whole architectural enterprise. However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *real plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses... The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (Heidegger 1971: 161).

<sup>7</sup> See Žižek (1991: 110) for a discussion of nationality as a good example of the limits of identity.

<sup>8</sup> In what is seen as this text's intertextual precedent, Elisha asks Elijah if he can first return home to "kiss his mother and father good bye". However, in contrast to Mt 8: 18-22, Elijah grants him permission (1 Kgs 19: 20).

## REFERENCES

All references to the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Aichele, G. 2011. *Simulating Jesus: Reality Effects in the Gospels*. London: Equinox.

Barton, S. C. 1994. *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Brawley, R.L. 2011. "Homeless in Galilee". *HTS* no. 67 (1).

Carter, W. 2000. *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Carter, W. 2001. *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*. Harrisburg: Trinity.

Casey, M. 2007. *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem*. London: T&T Clark.

Crossley, J.G. 2012. *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology*. London: Equinox.

Davies, W.D., and D.C. Allison. 1991. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. Vol. II, ICC. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Duling, D.C. 2011. *A Marginal Scribe: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew in a Social-Scientific Perspective*. Eugene: Cascade.

Eagleton, T. 2008. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Anniversary ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

France, R.T. 2007. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans.

Heidegger, M. 1971. "Building Dwelling Thinking". In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 143-161. New York: Harper & Row.

Horsley, R.A. 1989. *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*. New York: Crossroad.

Hurtado, L. and P. Owen. 2011. *Who is This Son of Man? The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*. London: Continuum.

Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Kingsbury, J.D. 1988. "On Following Jesus: The 'Eager' Scribe and the 'Reluctant' Disciple (Matthew 8: 18-22)". *NTS* no. 34: 45-59.

Luz, U. 1994. *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Mallett, S. 2004. "Understanding home: a critical review of the literature". *Sociological Review* no. 51 (1): 62-89.

Moxnes, H. 2003. *Putting Jesus in his Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom*. Louisville: WJK.

Nolland, J. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Reed, R.W. 2011. "The Problem of Ideology in Biblical Studies". *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* no. 40 (4): 17-23.

---

Rykwert, J. 1991. "House and Home". *Social Research* no. 58 (1): 51-62.

Saldarini, A. J. 2001. *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Žižek, S. 1989. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. 1991. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. 1997. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. 2008. *Violence*. London: Profile Books.