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Searching Scripture for the Location of Mt. Sinai and the Red Sea Crossing

David J. Reim

A Google search of “Mt. Sinai” or “Red Sea Crossing” produces many websites claiming that the location of Mt. Sinai is not where all the maps have pinpointed it for the last 1700 years. They suggest that it is not even in the Sinai Peninsula. You can also find claims that the location of the Red Sea crossing has been found, complete with pictures of coral that appears to be encrusted on chariot wheels and axles.

What are we to think about such claims? Many have been very skeptical because the man who discovered much of this is Ron Wyatt—a man whose qualification as a reputable archeologist is questionable. Some of his other “discoveries” have been debunked. Others may disregard the claims because the current location of Mt. Sinai has been universally accepted since the early 300s AD. It may seem almost sacrilegious to question it.

In this essay, we will examine the evidence supporting the traditional location of Mt. Sinai, also some of the new evidence that has been discovered, but mostly we will focus on the scriptural references relating to the location of Mt. Sinai and the Red Sea Crossing.

Evidence for the traditional site of Mt. Sinai

Since the traditional site of Mt. Sinai has been firmly established for so many centuries, we might assume that there is conclusive evidence for that location. Even the local residents refer to Mt. Sinai as *Jebel Musa*, the Mount of Moses. However, a little research reveals shockingly little evidence to support that location.

The location of Mt. Sinai has not been preserved from antiquity. Elijah knew where it was and traveled there when he became discouraged after the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. God spoke to him at Sinai in the “*still, small voice*” (1 Kings 19:12) and told him to get back to work. After that there is no further reference to the location of Sinai or Horeb in the Old Testament.

The Apostle Paul says Mt. Sinai is in Arabia (Galatians 4:25). However, that is not very helpful in narrowing down its location. There is ample evidence that the country of Arabia included the Sinai Peninsula from around 200 BC. David Rohl, author of *Exodus—Myth or History*, says: “The geographer Strabo (c. 64 BC to c. AD 25) described Arabia as bordering the Persian Gulf to the northeast and with its western border at the eastern bank of the River Nile.”¹ He gives several other references that demonstrate that the Sinai Peninsula was considered part of Arabia at the time that Paul wrote. Later, the Sinai Peninsula became part of the Roman province Arabia Petraea with its capital in Petra. So saying that Mt. Sinai is in Arabia does not call the long-accepted location into question.

However, the traditional location is not based on historical or archeological evidence. So one might wonder, “How was the location determined?”

The traditional Christian location of Mt. Sinai was established by Empress Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine. She determined the location based on the tradition handed down among the Bedouins of that area. She also claimed that the site was confirmed to her in a dream.²

Before concluding too much, we should consider some of Helena’s other “discoveries.” She claimed to have found the true cross of Christ. She located the exact spot where Jesus was born and had the Church of the Nativity built to mark the spot. She is also credited with having located the burning bush at Sinai and built a church by it. It is up to the reader to judge the reliability of Helena’s determinations. Nevertheless, her location for Mt. Sinai was accepted, as were the rest of her discoveries, no doubt because of her position. Thereafter, the Helena-identified location hasn’t been questioned much until more recent times.

To be fair, there are many scholars who defend the traditional location and cite various pieces of evidence in support. However, none of the evidence is conclusive. For instance, Josephus says that Mt. Sinai is the highest mountain in the area. Jebel-Musa and Mount Catherine, which make up what is known as Mt. Sinai today, are indeed the highest mountains in the Sinai Peninsula. However, if Mt. Sinai isn’t on the Sinai Peninsula, this means nothing.

Very little, if any, archeological evidence has ever been found that the Israelites lived at the base of this mountain for over a year. If a few

¹ David Rohl, *Exodus - Myth or History*, (St. Louis Park, MN: Thinking Man Media, 2015), 384

4 ² Lina Eckenstein, *A History of Sinai* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 99, 178-179

million people camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for over a year, would there not be some evidence of that today? Yet archeologists have been combing the area since the 1950s and have not found any evidence of the Hebrews there. Eight thousand inscriptions were found in the southern Sinai peninsula, but only a handful are Hebrew. Some have defended the lack of physical evidence by saying that a nomadic people like Israel at the time, does not leave much of a footprint. This may be true, but two or three million people would certainly have thrown out some broken pottery, or something; and what about the altars that were built and the pillars that were erected?

A more disturbing lack of physical evidence is related to another important biblical event, the Red Sea crossing. Bible skeptics have long poked fun at the claim of the Red Sea crossing. To them such a thing is ridiculously impossible and is clearly a legend. They love to point out that not a shred of evidence has been found to support it.

The biblical description doesn't even remotely match the physical topography of the area. For example, the account of the Red Sea crossing in Exodus describes Israel as being trapped between the Sea and the army of Pharaoh. The Angel of the LORD came between the Israelites and the Egyptians with the pillar of cloud and fire to keep them apart all night long (Exodus 14). The only way this would be possible is if the Children of Israel were camped on a large beach with mountains cutting off access to the beach except for a steep, narrow valley leading to the beach. If the land were wide open, the people would have been tempted to flee from the Egyptians, and the Egyptians would have pursued them. But if the people were truly trapped by the mountains and the sea and the Egyptian army was coming down the valley, God could easily stop them with a pillar of cloud and fire and keep His people safe all night long. This can be surmised from the Biblical text, but there is also this testimony from Josephus which represents Jewish tradition: "They were trapped between mountain cliffs and the Red Sea in front of them, so they could not flee."³

The problem is that the topography all along what is the Suez Canal today is very flat and open; there are no mountains. There is nothing in the whole area that resembles steep mountains cutting off access to the beach or preventing escape. Satellite images that are readily available on the internet reveal this. Nowhere comes even close to fitting the description. Most of the suggested locations for the crossing don't have any water at all today, or at most a small shallow lake. They say there was water in ancient times, but even so, it is questionable whether there would be enough water to drown an entire army.

³ Josephus, *The Essential Writings* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995), 56.

David Rohl has identified a location for the Red Sea crossing based largely on the meanings of the names. Translating *Yam Suph* as the *Sea of Reeds* and not the *Red Sea*, he pictures the crossing to be in a marsh and describes it as a natural phenomenon, not as a great miracle of God's deliverance.⁴ That certainly does not fit the biblical description of a wall of water on either side of Israel or the army being drowned in the depths of the sea.

When Pharaoh decided to pursue the Israelites, "*He took six hundred choice chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt with captains over every one of them*" (Exodus 14:7). If he had six hundred choice chariots, one can imagine he must have had a few thousand regular chariots. In addition, Josephus says that there were 50,000 horsemen and 200,000 foot soldiers. For that large of an army to be drowned at once, there had to be a very large body of water. If thousands of chariots with all their weapons of war lie in heaps on the bottom of the sea, wouldn't there be some remnants of all that still today? Many expeditions with modern technology have searched meticulously in all of the traditional sites and have not come up with anything. So many in the world conclude this is proof that the Red Sea crossing never happened.

We are not concerned that unbelievers mock the reliability of the Bible. Nor does this lack of evidence shake our faith in God's Word. The fact that no evidence has been found does not mean there is no evidence, or that it didn't happen. We always believe God's Word above whatever the skeptics may say. So, in spite of all the so-called problems, no God-fearing Christian doubts the reality of the Red Sea crossing. We know it happened because God says it happened. We don't need any visible proof because we live "*by faith, not by sight*" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Rather, we are concerned about the many people who have been deceived by the critics and scoffers into thinking that the Bible is not reliable. It is possible that even some Christians may be deceived and turn from the faith because of it. If searching in the wrong place has led to this lack of evidence, it would be foolish to hang onto the traditional location simply because that is what we have always believed.

The lack of physical evidence is enough reason to look for alternatives. However, it is Scripture which causes this writer to question the long held location of Mt. Sinai and to reexamine the biblical account in search of clues to the location of Sinai and the Red Sea crossing.

Examining the Evidence in the Biblical Text

When Pharaoh heard that Moses had killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave, he “*sought to kill Moses*” (Exodus 2:15). Moses fled from Egypt as a wanted man. He needed to get out of Egyptian territory. What we call the Sinai Peninsula was controlled by Egypt at the time of Moses. Pharaoh operated several mines in the area and had military outposts throughout the peninsula. That explains why Moses fled all the way to the land of Midian (Exodus 2:15) which was east of the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea.

Josephus actually says that he “escaped across the desert” and “came to a city called Midian.”⁵ Moses lived with Reuel, the Priest of Midian, who is called Jethro in Exodus 3:1. He married Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah, and they had two sons. Moses kept his father-in-law’s sheep, and that leads to the Bible’s first mention of Horeb: “*He led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God*” (Exodus 3:1). Let’s consider this important verse with some questions.

- 1. Understanding that what we call the Sinai peninsula was under Egyptian control at the time, would a wanted man return to the land where he was hunted just to feed his father-in-law’s sheep?** This was indeed forty years later, but the fact that God later reassured Moses, “*For all the men who sought your life are dead*” (Exodus 4:19), may indicate that Moses was still afraid to return.
- 2. Did Moses lead his father-in-law’s sheep all the way around the top of the Red Sea down to Mt. Sinai to find pasture?** If so, Moses traveled over 150 miles through rough mountainous terrain. That seems very unlikely.
- 3. What does it mean when God said that Moses led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb?** Doesn’t that imply that Moses was in the same desert and led them side of it, and not across several mountain ranges to a whole new desert in a different land?

Even more interesting and noteworthy is the route Moses took to get to Egypt. After the LORD appeared to Moses at the burning bush, Moses returned to his father-in-law and asked permission to return to Egypt (Exodus 4:18). God appeared to Moses again in Midian and told him a second time to return, “*Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead.*’ Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt” (Exodus 4:19-20). In the

⁵ Josephus, *The Essential Writings*, 50

meantime, God told Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses”. Where did they meet? “On the mountain of God” (Exodus 4:27).

If Moses was headed to Egypt with his family in tow, anxious to do what the LORD had sent him to do, would he travel one hundred miles out of his way back down to the tip of the Sinai Peninsula to meet Aaron before continuing on to Egypt? The text does not suggest that God told Moses he would meet Aaron, or that he was to go to Horeb to meet him. This makes much more sense if Mt. Horeb was somewhere along the way between their home in the land of Midian and the road to Egypt. Somewhere, for example, like the back side of the desert.

In addition to this, when Moses did return to Mt. Sinai with the people of Israel, Moses’s father-in-law brought Moses’s wife and two sons—whom Moses previously had sent back home—and met Moses at the mountain of God (Exodus 18:5).

A year later, when Israel was ready to leave Mt. Sinai, Moses asked Hobab, his brother-in-law, to come along with them when they left Sinai (Numbers 10:29-30). Hobab declined and went back to his home. All of Moses’ connection and travel between Mt. Sinai and the land of Midian would suggest that locating Sinai in or near the land of Midian would make much more sense than the traditional location.

Now let’s take a closer look at what Josephus says about Moses in Midian and Mt. Sinai. Josephus wrote that Moses fled to “a city called Midian, near the Red Sea.” Then he writes, “One day, Moses led Jethro’s flocks to graze on a mountain called Sinai. This was the highest of all the mountains there and the best for pasture.”⁶ This is more than saying that Mt. Sinai is the highest mountain in the area. He said it is the highest mountain in the general vicinity of this city of Midian.⁷

Interestingly, Arabic tradition speaks of a “Prophet Shoaib (*Shoaib* means “Who Shows the Right Path”), was a prophet of Islam mentioned in the Qur’an. He is believed to be Ibrahim’s great-grandson. He was sent as a prophet to the Midianites to warn them to end their fraudulent ways. When they did not repent, Allah destroyed them. Shoaib is traditionally identified with Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law according to the Hebrew Bible.”⁷ This man lived in the ancient city of Madyan. This city of Madyan in Arabic has been located by archeologists in the northwest corner of the Arabian peninsula at the present day city of Al-Bada. Al-Bada is located not far from the Gulf of Aqaba in the land of Midian. If you go today you can visit what are known to the locals as “the Caves of Jethro.”

⁶ Josephus, *The Essential Writings*, 50-51

8 ⁷ https://pbase.com/adnan_masood/prophet_shoaib

Jewish documents, some written 600 years before Christian traditions, also locate the mountain of God in Midianite territory. The Jewish historian Philo placed Mt. Sinai east of the Sinai Peninsula, south of Palestine. So perhaps we should be looking for Mt. Sinai in or near Midian.

Following the Biblical Description of the Exodus

After the death of his firstborn son, Pharaoh gave the urgent command to Moses and Aaron, *“Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel. And go, serve the Lord as you have said. Also take your flocks and your herds as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also”* (Exodus 12:31-32). That very day—the fifteenth day of what was now declared by the LORD to be the first month of the year (Exodus 12:51, Numbers 33:3)—the Children of Israel left Egypt and journeyed from Ramses to Succoth (Exodus 12:37).

The places mentioned along the way to Sinai are unknown to us today. Many maps will show their location, but these locations are based only on speculation about where Israel might have gone along their way to Sinai—assuming that Mt. Sinai is in the Sinai Peninsula. There is no physical evidence to support these locations.

The Timeline

The first mention of the passage of time is after Israel crossed the Red Sea. From the Red Sea they traveled three days and found no water and came to Marah, where God turned the bitter water sweet. *“Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters. And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt”* (Exodus 15:27 - 16:1). In Numbers chapter thirty-three, Moses gives a complete list of all the places where Israel camped from the time they left Egypt to the time they entered the Promised Land. Here we learn that Israel also camped at the Red Sea between Elim and the Wilderness of Sin (Numbers 33:10-11).

It had been exactly one month since Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month. Moses does not tell us how many days it took to get from Marah to Elim or how long they camped at either place, but the mention of a three-day journey from the Red Sea crossing to Marah and the rapid succession of the next two points gives the sense that they followed rather quickly after Marah. They likely were setting up camp every night once the threat of the Egyptians was past. So the time from the Red Sea crossing to the Wilderness of Sin would be at least six

days, possibly a week-and-a-half if they stayed multiple nights at some locations. A lunar month is twenty-nine or thirty days. That means that the children of Israel likely traveled somewhere between nineteen and twenty-four days from Ramses to the Red Sea.

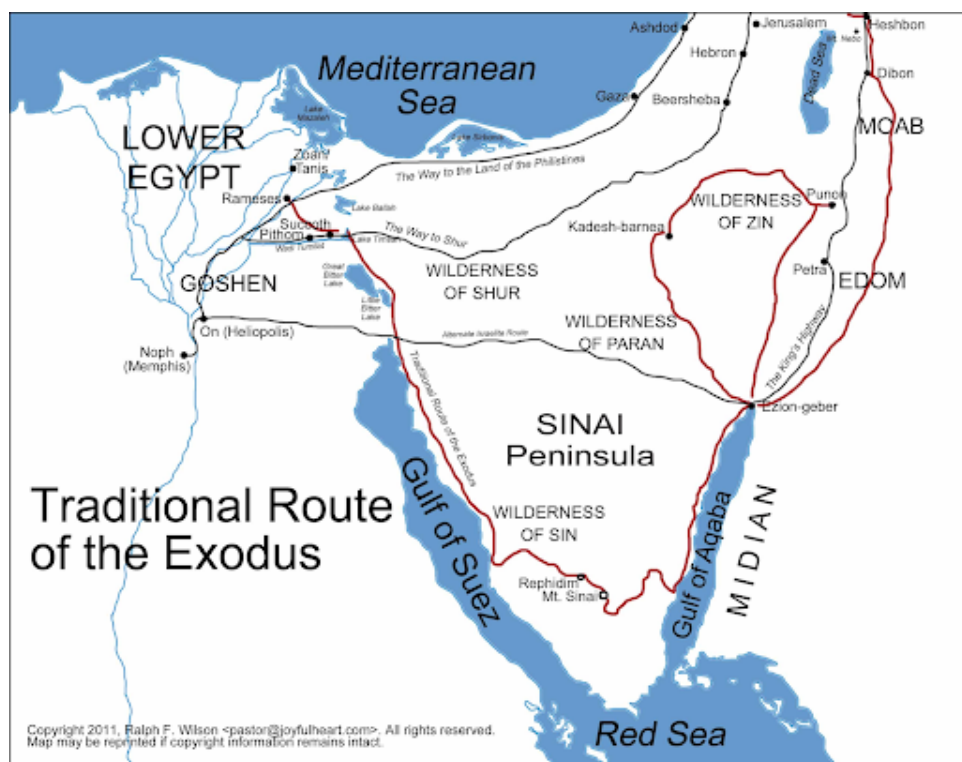
From this point forward, they slowed down considerably. It was in the Wilderness of Sin that God began giving them manna from heaven and in the evening He sent quail to cover the camp. Incidentally, Josephus says, “Soon, a vast flock of quail—of a species abundant in the Arabian Gulf—fell down on the Hebrews, who ate them and were satisfied.”⁸ When one reads the account of Israel’s disobedience regarding the amount of manna to collect (Exodus 16), it sounds like they were there at least several days staying over a Sabbath. This is the first time they rested on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:29-30).

The next camp was at Dophkah, then they camped at Alush. From Alush they went to Rephidim where many things took place according to Numbers 33: 12-14. First, they ran out of water and God gave them water out of the rock. Also, the Amalekites attacked them there, but God gave them victory as Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ hands (Exodus 17:8ff). Moses built an altar to the LORD at Rephidim and called it, “*The LORD Is My Banner*” (Exodus 17:15). Does building an altar imply that they stayed a while longer to worship the LORD at that altar?

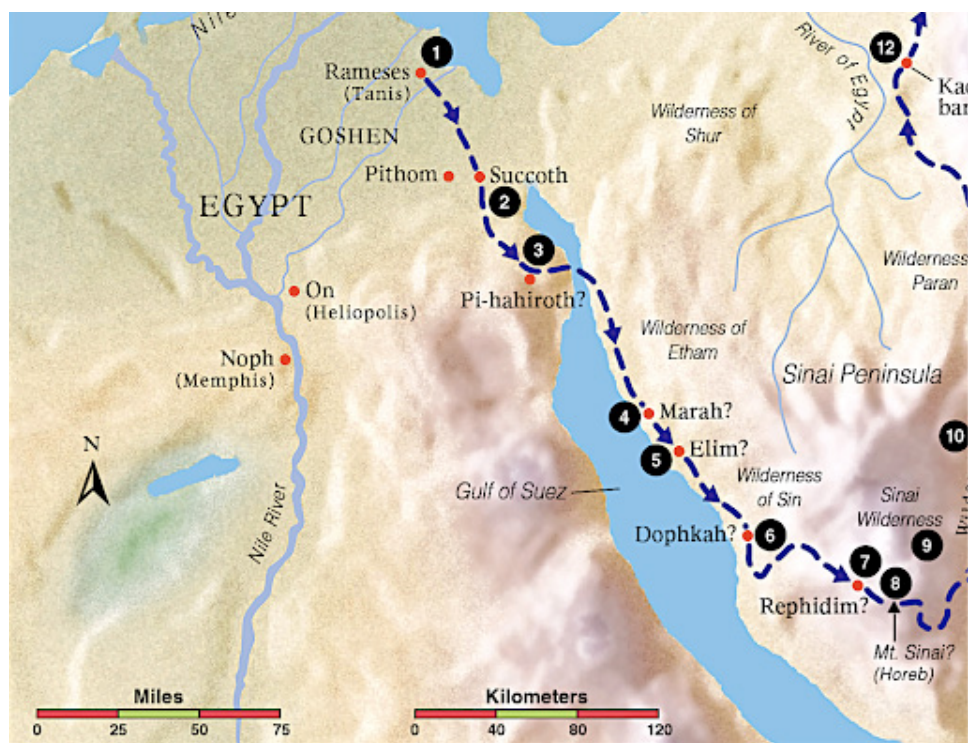
It was also while Israel was at Rephidim that Moses’ father-in-law came with Moses’ wife and sons, for Moses had sent them back (Exodus 18:1ff). Rephidim must be very close to Mt. Sinai because Moses met Jethro and his family at the mountain of God. After the day with Jethro, Moses was busy judging the peoples’ difficulties and inquiring of God for them “*from morning till evening*” (Exodus 18:13-15). It sounds like this had been going on for a while, and that was when Jethro advised Moses to appoint honorable leaders from the tribes to judge the people in the smaller cases and only bring the difficult cases to Moses. We can, therefore, conclude that Israel must have stayed at Rephidim for some time.

From Rephidim Israel came to the Wilderness of Sinai and camped before the mountain of the LORD. We are told they came to the Wilderness of Sinai in “*the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day*” (Exodus 19:1). So exactly two months after they left Egypt, the Children of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai.

According to the first proposed route, the Israelites traveled approximately 25 miles to get to the Red Sea (19-24 days), and then they traveled roughly 200 miles—the rest of the way to Sinai.



The proposed route has them traveling approximately 75 miles to get to the Red Sea (19-24 days). Then they cover approximately 70 more miles in the next three days after the Red Sea and perhaps another 120 miles after that to get to Sinai.



Map discovered in many online sources, but no attribution to original source determined.

Do these models make any sense at all when you consider the facts? The Egyptians were literally driving them out of the land. *“The Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste. For they said, ‘We shall all be dead’”* (Exodus 12:33). They baked unleavened cakes “because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait” (Exodus 12:39). The people were anxious to get out of the land as quickly as possible before Pharaoh changed his mind again. Is it really possible that they had covered such a short distance and not even gotten out of Egypt in the first three weeks?

Then when the pressure and fear of Pharaoh was off and they were clearly camping for longer periods, did they cover 200 miles? These models are utterly senseless. We would expect just the opposite—namely a much longer distance covered before the Red Sea and a much shorter distance after the Red Sea—even though there was a longer time period after the Red Sea.

The Route

Succoth seems to be their staging area. They left Ramses and camped at Succoth. There they baked their unleavened bread and from there they “*went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt*” (Exodus 13:18). Is there any Biblical description of the route that Israel took? Many study Bible notes and commentaries say something to this effect: “The fact of the journey of Israel from Egypt is not in dispute. The route is another matter.”⁹ Many say we don't know what route the children of Israel took. Is God's description really that vague? Consider Exodus 13:17-18 in the New King James Version (NKJV).

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

The NKJV makes this sound like a vague description of the general direction the Israelites traveled. It sounds as if God were saying “they went somewhere out in the wilderness somewhere around the Red Sea,” but that is not the case. The Hebrew word **יָרַד** can mean “journey,” but when it is “followed by a genitive of place it means the way which leads to that place.”¹⁰

The New International Version (NIV) does a better job of translating in this case.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.’ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.

All of the scholars recognize the “way of the land of the Philistines” to be a well-used trade route that followed along the Mediterranean Sea up to the land of the Philistines. This was the most direct route, but there were Egyptian military posts along the way and Philistine army posts. So God chose not to use that route and instead led them down the “desert road toward the Red Sea,” which was another specific road. We can see this when we look at the other places in the Bible where it is mentioned. The “desert road toward the Red Sea” is mentioned four more times in the Pentateuch—all in reference to the children of Israel's later wandering in the wilderness after they refused to go into the

⁹ Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, eds., *The Nelson Study Bible* NKJV (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 122

¹⁰ Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 208

promised land. For example, Numbers 21:4 says: *“Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom”* (cf. Numbers 14:25, Deuteronomy 1:40 and 2:1).

There were three roads out of Egypt to the East. The northerly route followed the Mediterranean Sea to Canaan. The way to Shur was in the middle, and the more southerly route was the desert way to the Red Sea which went from Egypt to Ezion Geber on the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and then up around Edom to the north. If there is any doubt that the Red Sea (literally, “Sea of Reeds”) refers to the Gulf of Aqaba, note that in the other references mentioned above, the road is described as going around Edom. Also 1 Kings 9:26 says, *“King Solomon also built a fleet of ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom.”* We know the location of Ezion Geber and Elath—both are at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Therefore, God has told us the route Israel took, namely, the desert road to the Red Sea. Then, before they reached Ezion Geber and the Red Sea, they stopped to camp on the edge of the wilderness in Etham. We don’t know the location of Etham, but after they crossed the Red Sea, they traveled *“three days journey in the Wilderness of Etham”* (Numbers 33:8). So it appears that the Wilderness of Etham runs up the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba around the northern tip, and when they reached the edge of this wilderness, they set up camp for the first time since they left Succoth (Numbers 33:6).

How could they get all the way across the Sinai Peninsula before setting up camp? There is a key verse in Exodus 13:20-22. After telling us that God led them on the desert road toward the Red Sea, Moses adds more information:

So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.

With the LORD leading them, the Israelites traveled day and night to get as far away from Egypt as quickly as possible. Finally, they stopped on the edge of the wilderness of Etham and set up camp. Then, instead of continuing north around the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and on down to Mt. Sinai, God told Moses to turn a different way:

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn and camp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon; you shall camp before it by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, ‘They are bewildered by the

land; the wilderness has closed them in.’ Then I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.” And they did so” (Exodus 14:1-4).

Where did they turn? Where is Pi Hahiroth, Migdol or Baal Zephon? No archeology has yet discovered evidence of these, but there are some interesting things to note about the names. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible gives the meaning of Pi Hahiroth as “mouth of the gorges”, and Migdol means “tower”. The Egyptians were known to have a system for flashing messages from watchtower to watchtower on the tops of the mountains throughout the Sinai Peninsula. So Israel was instructed to turn off the road to the Red Sea and camp on the Red Sea at the mouth of the gorges between the tower and the sea. If they were going to camp on the Sea, they would have to turn south off the Desert Road to the Red Sea.

This is where things become interesting. Using satellite images and looking south along the Gulf of Aqaba, one can easily see a dry stream bed or valley heading south, which goes through an increasingly deep, narrow canyon that comes out at a large flat beach on the Red Sea known today as Nuweiba.

A photo of the beach shows a situation exactly as one could expect it to be from the biblical description—a place where Pharaoh would easily conclude, “the wilderness has closed them in” (Exodus 14:3). The location also looks very much like “the Mouth of the Gorges?”

With beach covering an area of 28 square kilometers, there would be plenty of room for the two-to-three million Israelites to camp. The mountains are 500 meters high (over 1600 feet) and would be, therefore, an adequate barricade preventing escape. Furthermore, the narrow deep valley access would be easy for God’s pillar of cloud and fire to prevent Pharaoh’s chariots from advancing on Israel.

There are more items of interest to this location. There was an ancient Egyptian Fortress on the north end of the beach—this would prevent



Image accessed February 2024, <https://www.jewishtraveler.co.il/miracle-parting-red-sea-take-place/>

an escape to the north. It also shows that Egypt did control the Sinai Peninsula. It would also make sense that there would be a watch/signal tower at this location near the Egyptian fortress. This could also explain how Pharaoh knew that they were trapped on the beach.

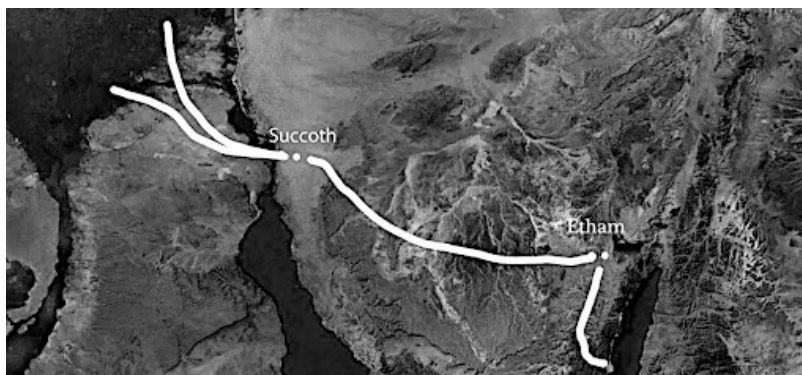
Another interesting detail is that the Gulf of Aqaba is extremely deep with sheer, underwater cliffs all along the edge, making it impossible for anyone to walk across it, much less drive a chariot across even if God would part the waters. This is true everywhere, except at Nuweiba Beach. The large sand beach extends as a large underwater sand bridge all the way across the Gulf at this point.

God prepared this large sand bar beforehand—probably in the years after the flood—so that His people could walk across the bottom of the sea to safety. While the sand bridge would provide a smooth path for walking, it is still 2500 feet deep in the middle of the 9.6 mile crossing. That certainly fits the description we find in several passages of the Bible, for example, Isaiah 51:10:

*Are You not the One who dried up the sea,
The waters of the great deep;
That made the depths of the sea a road
For the redeemed to cross over? (cf. Psalm 106:9)*

Matching pillars have been found on both sides of the Gulf of Aqaba at this point. These pillars have been set up once again. The inscription on the pillar at Nuweiba Beach is beyond recognition. The inscription on the matching pillar on the Arabian side of the gulf is damaged as well, but the Hebrew words for Egypt, death, water, pharaoh, Edom, Yahweh, and Solomon are still readable. This has led some to the conclusion that these pillars were erected by King Solomon to mark the site of the miraculous crossing.

Based on all this information, the actual route of the Exodus may have looked more like this.



Unable to attribute
original source

This route would involve approximately 250 miles in the first 20-24 days, which is about 10.5 to 12.5 miles per day. This would be a great distance for such a large group with their flocks and possessions, but it would be possible considering that they were in a hurry and that they traveled night and day.

If this was indeed the place of the Red Sea crossing, which it certainly appears to be, then can we trace the rest of the way to find the real Mt. Sinai? As you might expect, there are several suggested paths with different mountains associated with them. Probably the most promising and most accepted is Jebel al-Lawz—the highest mountain in the land of Midian.

Remember that Josephus placed Mt. Sinai in the vicinity of the city of Midian or Madyan in Arabic, and Madyan has been shown to be near the modern city of Al-Bada. Jebel al-Lawz is approximately 25-30 miles Northeast of Al-Bada as the crow flies. Apparently the locals refer to Jebel al-Lawz as Jebel-Musa.

There are some interesting features associated with this identification. To the west of Jebel al Lawz is a very unique rock which is large and split down the middle. It has been suggested that this is the rock that Moses struck to provide water for the people. One's first reaction might be, "that is pretty far-fetched to identify the very rock that water came pouring out." But on further consideration it may not be so far fetched after all.



Image accessed February 2024, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/saudi-arabia-christian-tour>

Consider what God told Moses, *“Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on **the rock** in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink”* (Exodus 17:5-6). It sounds like a very notable rock for God to simply refer to it as “the rock in Horeb.”

When Asaph describes the wonderful works of God for Israel during the Exodus, he says, *“He split the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink in abundance like the depths. He also brought streams out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers”* (Psalm 78:15-16). Close inspection of the rock reveals that there is evidence of water erosion in the split of that rock and on the slopes below. It is a very unique place indeed. Perhaps God has left evidence of the rock that He split and caused water to “run down like rivers.”

After God gave Israel His law, we read, *“And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel”* (Exodus 24:4). There is a pile of stones at Jabel al Lawz that could be the remnants of an altar and, more interestingly, in the same location there are several very round, hewn pillars.

Another interesting feature is what appears to be a very large stone altar. It has images of bulls inscribed on the rocks similar to the bulls that were worshipped in Egypt. Could this be the altar built for the golden calf?

A number of Hebrew artifacts have been found in the area even though the Saudi government has not allowed any full scale archeological investigation. Evidence of Hebrew presence includes a Menorah etched in a rock. Strangely, the top of Jebel al Lawz has been blackened by something. Could it be from when *“Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace”* (Exodus 19:18).

None of the evidence at Jebel al Lawz is conclusive proof, but it is far more evidence than has ever been found at the traditional site of Mt. Sinai. All of the things that happened at Sinai that would leave a lasting mark are present at Jebel al Lawz.

One drawback with identifying Jebel al Lawz as Mt. Sinai is that it is difficult to understand how or where they would have traveled to camp on the Red Sea between Elim and the wilderness of Sin (Numbers 33:10-11). That would be easier to understand if, after crossing the Red Sea, they had turned north.

Some have suggested Har Karkom in the Negev is Mt. Sinai. Others have suggested Mt. Seir, but another interesting detail makes both of these unlikely: *“It is eleven days’ journey from Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea”* (Deuteronomy 1:2).

Mt. Seir is the mountain range in Edom and is sometimes used as another name for Edom where Esau settled. If Mt Seir is Sinai, how could they leave Sinai and go by way of Mt. Seir to Kadesh Barnea? Mt. Har Karkom is just southeast of Kadesh Barnea and west of Mt. Seir. Why would they travel to Kadesh Barnea by way of Mt. Seir? If Mt. Sinai is near the bottom of the Sinai Peninsula, why travel eastward by way of Mt. Seir to reach Kadesh Barnea? This detail makes the most sense again if Mt. Sinai is in or near Midian, because then Israel would have to travel by way of Mt. Seir to get to Kadesh Barnea.

The fact that it took them only eleven travel days (Numbers 11-13) favors a more northerly location of Sinai. The distance from Jebel al Lawz to Kadesh-Barnea is approximately 130-140 miles, which would be challenging but doable, especially with rest days between travel. For example, on another occasion they spent at least one week in one place until Miriam was healed of her leprosy (Numbers 12:10-16). In contrast, traveling from the tip of the Sinai peninsula by way of Mt. Seir to Kadesh-Barnea is over 200 miles, which is a real stretch for a group of people that size to make in eleven days.

These are exciting times—times when more and more archeological discoveries are being found that correlate with the biblical record. We do not need these discoveries to be certain of the events that took place, nor do we rely on them for our faith. But it is exciting to find them, and it is wonderful to be able to show remaining evidence of these real-life events. All of these serve to give praise to God and show forth the wonders of His works. May God grant these discoveries to continue to be found to the glory of His name.

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The Lord's *Become as Little Children* Simile in Matthew 18

Steven P. Sippert

Whether He said it plainly or used figures of speech or taught in parables, Jesus brought the truth of God in words that were challenging, even jarring to His first-century audience. On the one hand, *“He taught with authority, and not as the scribes”* (Matthew 7:29), as noted with astonishment by those who heard the Sermon on the Mount. On the other hand, He communicated in “hard sayings,” because of which many *“walked with Him no more”* (John 6:66). Notice what Peter said to Jesus when He asked the twelve if they were going to leave Him too: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68).

Peter could not claim a better understanding of Jesus than those who turned away from Him. When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord made it clear to him and to us: *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 16:16-17). Peter stuck with Jesus as the Lord whose words conveyed eternal life only because of God’s power at work in his heart. Peter confessed Jesus as the divine Savior only by a faith that was gifted to him. At the same time he also demonstrated the wayward stumbling and failings of a man with the same sinful nature as those who rejected Jesus and spurned His hard sayings.

The jarring words of Christ come through as He speaks about Himself, about His kingdom, and about those who are part of His kingdom. It is this third category—what the Lord describes about disciple-believers—that this article hopes to address, with specific focus on what Jesus declares in the Gospel of Matthew. Four expressions stand out, taken in the order in which they occur. These are the *“poor in spirit”* of Matthew 5:3, the wording *“one of these little ones”* in Matthew 10:42 and also three times in Matthew 18, the *“infants”* statement of Matthew 11:25, and the *“little children”* simile of Matthew 18:1-5. This last expression will be examined more closely, with the other descriptions kept in mind as a workable foundation for an understanding of Matthew 18:3-4 that may not seem traditional to some or many of our readers.

Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the *poor in spirit* ...”

In the Gospel of Matthew the Lord’s detailed description of believers as His disciples does not occur until the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter five. With the first beatitude comes a jarring, paradoxical statement that sets a tone for other beatitudes that follow. He says in verse three: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” The positive sounding words, of course, are “blessed” and “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Having a stake in God’s kingdom as one who owns it even now is the reason for the blessedness. And that blessedness belongs, Jesus says surprisingly, to those who are “the poor in spirit” (οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι).

The Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG 3rd ed.) lexicon can guide one in understanding this striking, unexpected description of every believer in Christ. The words οἱ πτωχοὶ, literally “the ones begging,” can be defined generally as “those dependent on others for support.”¹

The dative modifier τῷ πνεύματι indicates that the beggarly in view is spiritual in nature. The spiritually poor, as beggars toward God, are continually dependent on God’s grace, who gives them the abundant wealth of owning His kingdom. The present indicative verb and the emphatically placed genitive of possession (αὐτῶν ἐστιν) lead to the conclusion that the believer has by faith, even now, what God offers in Christ as the “kingdom of heaven.”

Of course, we acknowledge that the expression “poor in spirit” is inherently true of all people. Everyone by nature is bankrupt in sin and desperately stuck in their spiritual poverty, with no means whatsoever to pay down their debt to God. In Matthew 5:3, however, Jesus has something more in mind, namely, that the “poor in spirit” are actually those who—in acute and constant awareness of their sins and sinfulness—recognize the plight of their spiritual poverty and function as beggars of God’s grace, who continually receive from Him what they desperately need.

Matthew 10:42: “And whoever gives *one of these little ones* ...”

What Jesus said in Matthew 10:42 has an expression used three times in Matthew 18. We are probably most accustomed to the occurrence in Matthew 18:6: “*But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.*” One instinctively thinks of children because of the previous verse: “*Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me*” (Matthew 18:5). Notably, confessional

¹ Frederick Danker (editor), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Third Edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 896

Lutheran editions of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* have made use of Matthew 18:6 ("these little ones who believe in Me") in their treatment of the question: Why do we baptize infants (little children)? This is done as biblical support for the proposition that infants can believe.²

A little more can be said about this later. For now, we seek to follow sound hermeneutical practice in tracing the Lord's intended meaning when first, in the presence of His disciples, He referred to "*one of these little ones*" in Matthew 10:42.

The setting of this verse is the previous content of chapter 10—what Jesus said in His missionary discourse to the twelve when He sent them out with instructions to proclaim the kingdom of God to their fellow Jews. His discourse to them concludes with verses 40-42:

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.

The New King James Version (NKJV) translation above is fairly literal in rendering εἰς ὄνομα as "in the name of." The English Standard Version (ESV) is somewhat interpretive in rendering the same words as "because he is."

It is not our intent to evaluate or defend a specific exegetical position of these words, but rather to focus on ἓνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων in verse 42, the exact same words that are present in Matthew 18:6. Nowhere in the larger context of Matthew 10 are children mentioned or implied. Instead, we notice in verse 42 the description of "prophet" and "righteous man" and "disciple." Jesus apparently has here referred to the disciples themselves as "little ones," probably in view of how they would be poorly treated and diminished greatly, regarded as "little" by those who would reject their message about Jesus. It is fitting, then, to expect a similar sense intended when Jesus repeated these same words three times in Matthew 18.

Matthew 11:25: "... and have revealed them to *infants*."

Matthew 11:25 comes in between verses of judgment that Jesus spoke over against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum and the well-known invitation: "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). Clearly, the context has no reference to

² Cf. the Gausewitz edition, p. 195; the Lutheran Synod Book Co. edition (ELS), p. 193; and the Sydow edition (2000), p. 155

babies or children when Jesus said, “*I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have **revealed them to babes***” (NKJV). The contrasting Greek words in verse 25 are σοφῶν καὶ συνετῶν and νηπίοις.

As noted similarly with Matthew 5:3, no one is “wise” and “prudent” toward God’s Word and its truths by nature. Everyone young and old is an “infant” when it comes to anything spiritual, especially God’s saving will in Christ. As He intends with the words “poor in spirit,” Jesus has more in mind. By these terms He refers to people who think themselves to be wise and prudent and to people who do not. Yet, to call full-grown men “infants” would suggest even more. In his extensive commentary series on Matthew, Jeffrey Gibbs makes a pointed observation worth keeping in mind:

The defining characteristic of the “infants” in this text should be read directly off its opposite, the “wise and understanding.” Jesus is not here commending those who have responded in faith to his ministry for some positive quality in themselves. Instead, he is saying that the divine revelation comes to those who (are led by the Spirit to recognize that they) are ignorant, impotent, and incapable of saving themselves, just as a helpless infant relies completely on parents for food, warmth, safety, and life itself.³

The setting of Matthew 18:1-6: “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

The abruptness of the Lord’s words in Matthew 18:3-6, combined with a young child whom Jesus brought in as a living object lesson, can be tied directly to the question that the disciples posed in Matthew 18:1: “*Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” These men were not talking about God or Jesus the Messiah in the exalted role of King, but rather themselves in their role as those closest to Jesus. One commentator opines that they were arguing about who was the “top disciple.”⁴

Matthew’s usage of Ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ and ἅπα would suggest that this question was tied in some way to the preceding narrative at the end of chapter 17, namely, the temple tax discussion that Jesus had with Peter.⁵

³ Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2-20:1* (Vol. 2) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 585, footnote 13.

It will also be stated here that the present writer in general has drawn extensively from the thorough exegetical treatment that Gibbs lays out in this same volume, pages 887-910. This includes the origin of certain terminology employed in this article (neediness, dependency, helplessness, vulnerability) and the thematic linking of the Lord’s expressions in Matthew 5:3, Matthew 10:42 (and three verses in Matthew 18), Matthew 11:25, and Matthew 18:3-4.

⁴ Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary*, 889, footnote 8 where he quotes France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 675.

24 ⁵ Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary*, 897.

Note especially what Jesus said to Simon Peter in Matthew 17:25-26:

“What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?” Peter said to Him, “From strangers.” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free.”

Jesus went on to give Peter instructions resulting in a miraculous provision of the temple tax payment required for both of them that would also remove a potential cause of offense.

The inferential particle in Matthew 18:1 would imply the disciples having knowledge of this interaction between Jesus and Peter. It seems to be the background for the question that they raise, which comes from an inappropriate attitude about themselves, something that the Lord would address immediately. To their surprise, we might imagine, Jesus summoned a small child, whose exact age and gender we don't know,⁶ and had this child join the whole group. The presence and sight of the child would add to the impact of the words Jesus was about to speak to them in response to their misguided question.

Matthew 18:3-4: “unless you are converted and become as little children”

The Lord's words in verse three are quite emphatic on the basis of two things in the text. First, He has introduced His answer with His own unique declaration of divine authority: ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν. This is a reminder to take what He has said as the absolutely reliable truth from God. The second emphatic device is found in the grammatical construction that involves οὐ μὴ. Greek grammars routinely refer to οὐ μὴ with an aorist subjunctive as an emphatic future negative assertion. The Lord's rebuke comes through like this: “Forget about having any greatness in the kingdom of heaven! You will not even enter it unless you become as little children.”

More literally, Jesus said: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and *become as little children*, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” After His authoritative ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν the Lord proclaims in a third class condition to disciples then and now a jarring truth that involves a key simile, expressed in the words γένησθε ὡς τὰ παῖδια. These words are combined with the aorist passive verb form στραφῆτε. English translations vary on the sense of this passive form, ranging from “converted” (taken as a true passive, i.e., “turned”) in NKJV and New American Standard Bible (NASB) to “change” in New Revised Standard (NRS) and NIV to “turn” in ESV. Grammatically, the option of “change” or “turn” is possible if one adheres to a principle that in the passive of certain verbs, like στρέφειν, the transitive sense

⁶ The Greek form is grammatically neuter, which allows for a boy or a girl to be the child who was summoned, whose age was possibly under seven (Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 749)

of turning someone or something as the meaning for active forms becomes the intransitive idea that one simply turns. Along such lines BDAG lists for στρέφειν as a fifth definition: “5. to experience an inward change, ‘turn, change,’—passive in active sense—make a turn-about.”⁷

If taken in the intransitive sense above, then the Lord has issued a call to repentance that is applicable to believers and unbelievers. For those men and their question of personal greatness, there had to be a change, a turning from self-seeking pride to the opposite, the other end of the spectrum, epitomized in their collective understanding of “little children” and a vivid reminder of what that means in the form of such a child standing in their midst. But what exactly was that understanding supposed to be, which Jesus expected them to have without much further description? Was it child-like trustfulness or child-like humbling? Notice a combination of both from Lenski, who in quoting Besser writes on the intended “childlikeness” in Matthew 18:3:

*“To permit oneself to be called, led, loved, without pride and without doubt, in simple trust, that is childlikeness even as this is the nature of children who possess nothing but need everything; who are able to do nothing but receive everything; to earn nothing but receive everything as a gift—thus must all who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven become by conversion.” Humble trustfulness is a good summary of what Jesus has in mind.*⁸

Lenski is not alone in taking “humble trustfulness” or something like it as the intended meaning.⁹

Curious, though, is the other part of Besser’s definition, that children “are able to do nothing but receive everything; to earn nothing but

⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 948-949

⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House), 681. Lenski also argues plausibly for “converted” rather than “turn” or “change” in this verse.

⁹ Joh. Ylvisaker, *The Gospels: A Synoptic Presentation of the Text in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1932), 421: “[The disciples] must return to the gentle submissiveness of the child, the truly childlike mind. The point of comparison is not innocence, but ingenuousness, the absence of arrogance, simplicity, humility. These are distinguishing traits of the child, even though the perverse spirit is early manifest.”

Werner Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary: New Testament*, Volume 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), 354: He writes more extensively on the “key question: ‘Just how is spiritual childlikeness illustrated or exemplified by the child. ...?’” His lengthy answer involves “two points of similarity” — “(1) *Simple, unquestioning trust* marked by the conduct of the child toward Jesus” and “(2) *A complete humility*” (ital. orig. for 1 and 2). There is even an echo of Lenski in the words “humble trustfulness” on the same page.

G. J. Albrecht, M. J. Albrecht, *The People’s Bible—Matthew* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 256: The writers expound on Christian humility as the “main point of comparison,” with such humility defined as “recognizing personal sinfulness and unworthiness and inability to do anything at all to become worthy before God and earn salvation wholly or even partially. Humility depends entirely on God’s mercy for forgiveness and salvation. It looks to Jesus Christ as the Savior, who offered up himself as the perfect sacrifice for all sins.”

receive everything as a gift ...” It is this trait of their neediness and dependency (which little children had in ancient cultures and still have in modern cultures) that tends to be overlooked as the intended point of comparison in the Lord’s simile of Matthew 18:3.

To this writer, the intended point of comparison should be readily recognizable—something true of young children around the world and down through the ages. Is it their alleged trusting nature which some might otherwise call gullibility? Are children around the world and down through the ages the role model for adults on proper humbling of self? Does the Old Testament compel or at least readily support such lines of comparison?¹⁰

Let’s keep in mind that children have the same corrupt sinful nature that leads them to be the opposite of trusting and humble in all spiritual matters. For that reason they too are in need of God-given conversion and repentance as much as anyone.

However, in terms of human needs for earthly existence, a key difference between young children and adults is their day-to-day lack of self-sufficiency. Around the world and down through the ages, little children have depended on their parents and other adults for food, clothing, shelter, protection, and the like. They are equally in the same boat as needy, dependent creatures, whether they lived in ancient Palestine or they live in modern day North America. This consistent, universal feature is quite compelling and reliable in tracking what Jesus meant when He said “become as little children.” We are to be spiritually with our heavenly Father what little children are physically with their earthly parents. We in our spiritual neediness and dependency are to look expectantly to our Father in His grace, relying on Him to provide what we can’t—the forgiveness of our sins and the good news of our salvation in Christ. This is the same as being “poor in spirit,” continually begging from God all needed spiritual blessings in accord with His grace to us in Christ. To do otherwise takes a person into the realm of self-sufficiency and, as the Lord’s words emphatically state, keeps one out of the kingdom of heaven.

Of course, Jesus said more in verse 4 that is linked to verse 3 with an inferential conjunction: “*Therefore (οὖν) whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” The meaning of verse 3 is tied to verse 4, which should be unpacked along one of two lines: 1) either regard ὡς τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο as indicating a nominative idea or 2)

¹⁰ This type of query is articulated by Gibbs in a section called “The ‘Child’ in Ancient Context” (pp. 890-893, Vol. 2), in which he concludes that neither the culture of the times nor the Old Testament Scriptures in particular would make a compelling case for the young child as a ready-to-use role model for adults.

¹¹ The neuter form has the same ending for nominative and accusative, leaving a decision between the two based on context alone.

as indicating an accusative idea.¹¹ The nominative sense would mean “whoever humbles himself in the same way as this little child humbles himself.” The accusative idea would render as “whoever lowers himself to be in the same position as this little child.”¹²

The context of verse 3 seems to favor the accusative sense. To “become as little children” means for each disciple of Christ to take the same lowly position as the little child Jesus referred to; and when that happens, this person “is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

To reiterate once more, the example of the little child was not about his attitude or demeanor, or the way he related to the adults in his life. The example of the little child was bound up in his innate lowly status as one in constant need of care. His capability was only that of receiving that which he continually needed to be provided to him. Neediness, dependency, and vulnerability—these are the characteristics recognizable in little children everywhere, which when spiritually actualized by faith in God’s grace will cause one to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So says the King Himself who rules that kingdom. What an astounding answer to the question raised in verse 1! In the following verses Jesus will elaborate on two related principles that are to govern how His disciples think about themselves and each other in constant recognition of their mutual spiritual neediness.

Matthew 18:5-6:

“one little child like this in My name”

“one of these little ones who believe in Me”

In Matthew 18:5-6 Jesus begins to define in concrete terms what “greatness in the kingdom of heaven” will mean for His believer-disciple citizens in this present New Testament age. The perspective is not entirely eschatological, since the present indicative ἐστίν in verse 4 points to an ongoing status. Verse 5 reveals how the lowly, needy believer—in this instance a young child—is truly the greatest in the kingdom of heaven from the Lord’s point of view. The standard of greatness is measured according to value—the level of value to the King Himself, who said: “*And whoever receives **one little child like this in My name** receives Me.*”

It is not the purpose of this article to treat the exegesis and application of verse 5 along the lines of Christian education for young children, as worthwhile a topic as that is. Clearly Jesus was teaching all His believers the need and expectation of bringing His lambs to the green pastures of His gospel, which constitutes the essential substance of His “name.” And in so doing, let us note, it is as though the believer in ministering to the young child is receiving Christ Himself. That’s how

valuable the lamb is to the Good Shepherd. He personally identifies with this young soul. He is directly connected to the treatment given to this vulnerable member of His family. Thus He takes this little one's eternal welfare very seriously, which the next verse indicates in yet another jarring statement from the Lord of the Church who shepherds all of His people from oldest to youngest.

In the paragraphing of the Nestle-Aland 28th edition of the Greek New Testament, Matthew 18:6 begins the next paragraph after the initial one, verses 1-5 in Matthew 18. This happens despite parallel grammar and word usage that one can observe in verses 5 and 6. Three similarities are summarized here to illustrate. Both verses are constructed as ὅς ἐστιν (v.6 ὅς δ' ἔστιν) with an aorist subjunctive verb. Both include as a direct object an accusative form of "one"—ἐν in verse 5 and ἕνα in verse 6. Both verses involve first person pronouns tied to Jesus: ἐμὲ in verse 5 as a direct object and also in verse 6 as the object of εἰς. This raises the question whether the threefold parallel structure argues for including verse 5 as the beginning of the next paragraph and having the previous paragraph end with verse 4. Gibbs argues for retaining the paragraphing of Nestle-Aland on two grounds: the drastic shift from positive exhortation in verse 5 to negative condemnation and warning in verse 6, and secondly, the use of ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων in verses 6 and 14 as forming an *inclusio* to mark these two verses as bookends ("brackets") of the next section.¹³

Even so, the interconnection of the two verses is striking, while also indicating a progression of application to be developed in such a way that the child of verse 5 is not the only one in mind when Jesus says "one of these little ones" for the third (18:10) and fourth time (18:14) in Matthew. We hear the second occurrence in Matthew 18:6: *"But whoever causes **one of these little ones who believe in Me** to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depths of the sea."*

It was previously mentioned that the Lord's expression "one of these little ones" (Matthew 10:42) was apparently referring to the disciples themselves. They would become little in multiple ways, including the way that the unbelieving world would treat them. In Matthew 18:6 it is natural to equate this same expression to the child mentioned in verse 5. Certainly the child fits the description. The strong warning of verse 6 covers him as well, namely, that no one is to do or say anything that would lead even one like him astray (σκανδαλίση). When he is received "in the name" of Jesus, we are to recognize him as "one of these little ones who believe in" Christ, whose faith has been engendered by the gospel of Christ. Yet though they are "little ones" in stature and status

¹³ Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary*, 900

and essentially nothing in self-sufficiency, their value to Christ and His heavenly Father is so great that the wrath and judgment of God will come to bear on anyone who causes just one of them to be lost.

However, it is not just the children who constitute the “little ones who believe” in Jesus. Certainly the context of verses 6-14 and even the grammar contrast in verses 5 and 6 point in this direction. Within the parallel structure previously noted, one can find some differences too. Jesus shifts from a neuter singular qualitative expression in verse 5 (ἐν παιδίον τοιοῦτο) to a masculine plural demonstrative expression in verse 6 (ἐνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων). The shift from neuter ἐν to masculine ἐνα and a visible plural group there in the room (pointed to with τοῦτω τῶν πιστευόντων) seem to match the disciples better than the one child. At the very least, doesn’t it include them with the child? Recall as well that the Lord had coined this expression already in a discourse centered on them in their pending missionary endeavors laid out in Matthew 10.

We can add to the above the Lord’s call to repentance in Matthew 18:3-4 that they were to become as the little child and individually stand with him as “one of these little ones who believe in Me.” At the same time, the primary characteristic of being “little” does not shift. They are like the child in having the same neediness, dependency, and vulnerability with regard to their own souls, especially as sheep who are hunted as prey. It is this vulnerability that Jesus speaks to strikingly and urgently in the upcoming verses. They, as “little ones” themselves, are to recognize their own vulnerability over against the inevitable offenses (τὰ σκάνδαλα) around them and be prepared to take even extreme measures of self-preservation against them (Matthew 18:7-9).

Matthew 18:10-14 helps to underpin the exegetical conclusion that the phrase “one of these little ones” is to be applied to any believer regardless of age. In verse 10 Jesus commands: *“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones,”* for their value to the heavenly Father includes His constant care extended through *“their angels.”* Then comes the concept of seeking the lost—lost sheep gone astray (v. 12), the great joy in heaven when such a sheep is recovered (v. 13), and the Lord saying a third time in Matthew 18: *“Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish”* (v. 14). Verses 15-18 add further direction from the Good Shepherd on how the sheep who have not gone astray are to seek and gain back their “brother” sheep who has.

At this point it becomes clear that the Lord’s expression “little ones” in Matthew 18 must include all who believe in Him. In verse 6 the focus

fits the child believer without excluding the adults. In verses 7-14 the focus moves toward struggling and straying adults without leaving out the child. Regardless of age, they are all spiritually at the same level of “little ones,” valued by Jesus as “greatest” in His kingdom, and in their constant state of vulnerability, cared for so zealously by their heavenly Father.

From Matthew 5 through Matthew 18, we find Jesus using such striking descriptions of His believing followers, who as “little” in the kingdom of heaven are regarded as great in the kingdom of heaven. They are “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3), “infants” to whom God reveals His saving truth (11:25), in the same lowly position as “little children (18:3-4), and thus joining the group of vulnerable yet valuable “little ones” who believe in Him.

Taken together, all four expressions point in the direction of spiritual lowliness, neediness, helplessness, and dependency. As stated at the outset, all people regardless of age, gender, and nationality fit such descriptions by nature. It is only by the grace and working of God that believers are given to know their needy, dependent spiritual condition and are continuously turned back upon Him as their gracious, steadfast, protecting Father, who constantly gives them what they need. In that way they (and we) are functioning spiritually as little children routinely do physically in depending on their earthly parents for all their necessities in life.

As for the commonly held view that Jesus teaches the necessity of child-like faith for disciples of all ages, Matthew 18:3-6 may not be a good candidate as a *sedes* for that teaching. One can look to the more direct statement of Luke 18:15-17, which also uses the Greek term τὰ παῖδια:

Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when His disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.”

We readily sense the normative example of a small child receiving the kingdom of God. They own the kingdom as a gift by receiving it in faith.

That said, there is a simile here as well, δέξεται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παῖδιον, which invites a question. What is it about the small children, including infants (Luke 18:15) that is to be emulated, yes, required by all of Christ's disciples? Isn't it the passivity—that the infants and the other little children are brought to Jesus to be blessed by Him? If

not for that, they would not be in His kingdom, since in their helpless state they would continue to remain outside of it. In the same way older people are also helpless and thus their role is also passive when the Lord brings them to Him through the calling of the gospel and the Spirit-worked faith in His Son that God provides.

Finally, we notice that the Savior's instruction to His disciples in Matthew 18 (think *pastors in the making*) needed the reinforcing of the Luke 18 narrative, parallel to Matthew 19:13-15, that occurred at a later time. We rely on His patience and persistence with us too, as we learn again and again what it means on His part and ours to "become as little children," who receive His kingdom and remain eternally in it only by divine grace and God-worked saving faith.

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In Memoriam: John H. Johannes

1931 - 2019

PSALM 139:16

**Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them.**

John H. Johannes was born on January 18, 1931, in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, the son of Edward R. and Alma E. (Wilsmann) Johannes. Soon after, the God who redeemed John also sanctified him and made him His own child in the waters of baptism. John was raised and confirmed in the Christian faith, instilled with a trust in His Savior in which Jesus kept him his entire life.

JOHN 3:5-6

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Lord, Thee I love with all my heart;
I pray Thee, ne'er from me depart,
With tender mercy cheer me.
Earth has no pleasure I would share,
Yea, heav'n itself were void and bare
If Thou, Lord, wert not near me.
And should my heart for sorrow break,
My trust in Thee no one could shake.

Thou art the Portion I have sought;
Thy precious blood my soul has bought.
Lord Jesus Christ, My God and Lord, my God and Lord,
Forsake me not! I trust Thy Word.
(*The Lutheran Hymnal* 429:1)

In love for the Lord Jesus and His gospel, John devoted his studies to the Scriptures in hopes of serving as a minister of the Word. He was a graduate of Northwestern Lutheran College in Watertown, Wisconsin, and then of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin.

GENESIS 2:24

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

On August 10, 1958, John married Joanne L. Paulmann at First German Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The Lord blessed John and Joanne with seven children. John was a loving father; together with Joanne he raised his children to know and love the Lord.

PSALM 127:3-5

**Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.**

John was called by the Lord of the Church to serve at various congregations during his ministry. These included Trinity Lutheran Church, Neenah, Wisconsin; Peace Lutheran, Isabell, South Dakota; Grace Lutheran in Carlsbad, New Mexico; Mt. Olive Lutheran in Lamar, Colorado. He spent most of his years at Luther Memorial in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. He organized Peace Thru Christ in Middleton, Wisconsin, while serving Faith Ev. Lutheran in Cambridge, Wisconsin. He spent most of his years at Luther Memorial in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. He also served as chaplain in a group home for the disabled in Madison, Wisconsin. Following retirement from his Fond du Lac ministry in 1999, he was called to Zion Lutheran in Atlanta, Georgia,

where he served until 2002. For the last few years of his earthly life, John was a member at Living Hope Lutheran Church in Appleton, Wisconsin. He was an avid gardener and enjoyed collecting stamps and camping.

Yea, Lord, 'twas Thy rich bounty gave
My body, soul, and all I have
In this poor life of labor.
Lord, grant that I in ev'ry place
May glorify Thy lavish grace
And serve and help my neighbor.
Let no false doctrine me beguile;
And Satan not my soul defile.
Give strength and patience unto me
To bear my cross and follow Thee.
Lord Jesus Christ, My God and Lord, my God and Lord,
In death Thy comfort still afford.
(TLH 429:2)

PSALM 116:15

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

Early in the morning on Thursday, November 21, 2019, while at home at Peabody Manor in Appleton, in His tender love the Lord Jesus called John to his eternal home. The day before, John had listened to the Word which had been his comfort and trust his whole life. Though he could hardly speak at all, he sang along loudly with a number of hymns and then prayed the Lord's Prayer.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-1

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the

trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Lord, let at last Thine angels come,
To Abram's bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
Until Thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,
My Savior and my Fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ, My prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise Thee without end.
(TLH 429:3)

A funeral service was held on Sunday, December 1, 2019, at Luther Memorial, Fond du Lac, WI, with Pastor David Ude officiating.

Hymns:

Jerusalem the Golden (TLH 613), *Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus* (TLH 409), *Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense* (TLH 206), and *Abide with Me! Fast Falls the Eventide* (TLH 552).

Readings:

Job 19:23-27, 1 Corinthians 15:20, 50-58, and John 11:1-44 as the sermon text.

Theme:

“What Does Jesus Do When a Christian Dies?”

1) He comes, 2) He weeps, 3) He gets angry, 4) He raises the dead.



Causing Our Souls to See Good in the Toil of Our Ministry*

John H. Johannes

I want to begin by making a statement that we all should readily come to accept and believe: *It is a great thing to be a minister of Christ.* There are many times when we need somewhat of a pep talk. We need to be turned away from the discouragements which come from viewing our failures and because so many reject or fail to appreciate the gospel which the ministry brings. We need to be reminded what the greatness of the ministry really is. So must the Lord again and again call us back as He did His prophet of old: *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* (1 Kings 19:9) It is a great thing to be a minister of Christ. It is great, however, only in the Lord's own sense, according to the faithful saying: *“If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work”* (1 Timothy 3:1).

It is a good work. It is great and good—a noble, excellent work in the sight of God and of all true Christians. And let us note well it is a *work*. It is no life of ease, no sure thing. It is a work which, as also the Lord would have us recognize, takes in the whole of the man and his entire conduct. It calls for all his energy. It takes into account his every waking moment and his sleeping too. And even his home—his wife and children—are not exempt from its requirements. This may be something which we pastors don't always remember. Though we may sometimes forget it, the world often does not. Certainly God wants us to remember it always.

But the toil of the ministry with all that is required in it has its blessings and does cause our souls to see good, or can we go so far as to say that the work of the ministry can and should cause our souls to *rejoice*?

What brought us into the ministry of the gospel?

None of us will say that we have chosen the ministry because we desired glory in this world. If that were the case, it would not be long and we would have abandoned the ministry for an occupation or position that would satisfy our love for glory. Remember how the Lord Jesus cautioned His disciples that they should not think that they would be honored and esteemed in the world as His witnesses. *“They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service”* (John 16:2).

* John H. Johannes delivered this essay to the Great Lakes Pastoral Conference in February 1992.

The apostle Paul expressed the thought of the ministry as nothing in which to glory, *“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of”* (1 Corinthians 9:16). The one who wrote these words had come to know and see the glory of the gospel such as few others have. Paul again and again refers to “the glorious gospel.” It is not the gospel that lacks the glory, for what can be more glorious than the everlasting gospel which brings dying mortals life and salvation? Paul is saying of himself and of all who would follow in his calling that they have nothing to boast of in the proclamation of that gospel. And why not? Paul had learned to see the meaning of God’s overwhelming grace, which accounted for all that was worthy of praise and glory in his life.

Speaking of his own calling into the ministry, Paul has this to say, *“Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me”* (1 Corinthians 15:8-10).

Paul’s entrance into the ministry of grace was not due to any of his choosing. In fact, he was in the midst of a most unholy act—laying waste the church of God—when God called him on the way to Damascus. Paul learned in due time the full implication of the words which the Savior had spoken to His disciples in His farewell sermon, *“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain”* (John 15:16).

What is it that worked that miracle of change in Paul? It was God, who through the Holy Spirit turned Saul around. What is it that brought you into the ministry of the gospel? Was it not also this, that God through His Holy Spirit brought you to know the grace of God in Christ Jesus—calling you through the Gospel, enlightening you with His gifts, sanctifying you and keeping you in the faith? Then, out of this living faith in the Savior springs the desire for the work of the ministry. This is expressed by Paul when he says, *“To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”* (Ephesians 3:8). We, as humble believers in our Savior Jesus Christ, desire to serve in the ministry as a fruit of our faith.

Again, let us turn to the apostle Paul, who tells us what it was which drove him on in his toil in the ministry: *“necessity is laid upon me”* (1 Corinthians 9:16). Unless you and I who have chosen the ministry of reconciliation as our life calling can make a similar confession, we

will not see good or joy in the toil of the ministry. For can we not also say with the apostle Paul, *“The love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again”* (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)?

This is the necessity which has been laid upon us as it was upon Paul. None of this was Paul's doing or our doing, but our Lord's doing. Was it a toil or burden from which Paul longs to be free? By no means. Is the toil of the ministry to which the Lord has called us something from which we desire to be free? By no means. It is a yoke which, according to Christ's own promise, is easy and a burden which is light (Matthew 11:28). Blessed are we in our chosen life-calling if we can of a truth confess:

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die.
(*The Lutheran Hymnal* 157:4)

What is the good or the joy in the toil of the ministry?

The toil of the ministry is centered around the word. Two things can be attributed to that word. First, that it is absolutely faithful, reliable, trustworthy in what it teaches. Secondly, that it alone can save, comfort, and convict as it is faithfully taught. So, we in our care of the church and of those entrusted to us in our ministry must show that what is attributed to the word is also the conviction of our hearts. We must be able to show the conviction of a Peter, *“We have the prophetic word confirmed”* (2 Peter 1:19) and *“at Your word I will let down the net”* (Luke 5:5).

As we toil in the word, searching the Scripture, meditating upon it, searching it in depth in our ministry, we are first of all blessed with the nourishment of our own faith. In this manner the word and its message is for us something good and a joy to our souls—comforting and strengthening us for the toil of our ministry. For as we find comfort and strength in the gospel for ourselves, we are better prepared to use that same word and gospel to admonish, to exhort and comfort souls in their lives as God's children. Let us never forget that we cannot better preach righteousness of life and hope than by preaching the righteousness of Christ.

There is also the matter of our own spiritual life. That too is a part of our care of the church and an important part. It is written, *“Take heed*

to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16). What we as pastors so boldly proclaim to others in Jesus' name must be what we ourselves, as lowly sinners, cling to, reaching out to it with trembling and empty hands and saying, "*O wretched man that I am!*" (Romans 7:24), and "*God, be merciful to me a sinner!*" (Luke 18:13). As a poor, wretched sinner who daily stands in need of God's pardoning grace, it must be the cry of our hearts as it was of Peter and the apostles, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*" (John 6:68). That, finally, is what Paul means when he exhorts a pastor to be "*holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict*" (Titus 1:9).

In "holding fast the faithful word," we will be able to exhort, that is, to "*comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God*" (2 Corinthians 1:4). What joy and good is there for us in being able to serve our Lord in this manner. Then too, toiling in our ministry to hold fast to the faithful word of our God means that we will be able to convict those who contradict. Not that they will always, or perhaps even often, be won by the word, but that they stand convicted before the truth of God's word and that the believers may be warned of their errors.

"Holding fast the faithful word"—it sounds so simple. It is so easy to speak of what it all means, but what one of us has not experienced how hard it is to live up to its requirements? How many are the temptations of compromise, the lure of carnal security, the danger of formalism. There is always the danger of letting the life-giving word slip through our fingers.

Even the apostle Paul never let himself forget the danger for himself. While he could say in the full assurance of faith, "*I know whom I have believed*" (2 Timothy 1:12), yet he also knew that he had need daily to watch and fight and study and pray, "*lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*" (1 Corinthians 9:27). It was his constant concern that "*I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me*" (Philippians 3:12). He would be mindful of how great a thing it is to be a minister of Christ—how great its responsibilities, if his ministry was to be blameless.

What shall we say when we compare ourselves and our toil in the ministry to what God requires of us? Who of us is not made heavy of heart, no matter where we take up the comparison, realizing our shortcomings, our failings, our sins—and how often by only a word, wrongly spoken or spoken at the wrong time or not spoken when it

should have been spoken. With every new day God grants us, as we grow older in His service, we feel it the more by how much we fail. This does not give us cause for joy and good in our toil in the ministry. As we flee daily to Christ and His cross and are there assured of our forgiveness, we still know that we are no more worthy to be called His servants. Then can we cry out from our hearts, even as Peter of old, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8). Yet by these words do we, like Peter, rather mean to say: O Lord, we are not worthy to be near You, but oh, let us stay!

Then to us, even as He did to Peter and the apostles, our Savior gives the answer: *"Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men"* (Matthew 4:19); *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you"* (John 15:16); work *"while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work"* (John 9:4); *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20); *"fear not, for I am with you; / be not dismayed, for I am your God; / I will strengthen you, I will help you, / I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."* (Isaiah 41:10).

Therefore, as it is written, *"since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart"* (2 Corinthians 4:1). Poor, weak vessels of clay, we know that the treasure of the gospel has been committed to us, not that we should have to lend it power, but *"that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us"* (2 Corinthians 4:7). Our sufficiency, if we would call it that, is all of God and comes to us by the very word which He has called us to share. He has assured us, *"My word...shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:11).

So we will go again and again to that word for inspiration and guidance. There we may readily learn how we ought to conduct ourselves in the toil of our ministry, how we in our place can serve the LORD with gladness. May our souls see good in the toil of our ministry as the LORD does grant it.



Book Reviews

David T. Lau

Michael Zarling: *Resisting the Dragon's Beast – What If God's Servant of the Government Behaves like Satan's Servant?*, Athanatos Publishing Group, Greenwood, Wisconsin, 2023, paperback, 231 pages, 4 preliminary pages.

The title of this book refers to Revelation 13, which the author, a Lutheran pastor from Wisconsin, believes present-day Christians should study along with Romans 13 when considering the proper response to government mandates such as masking, vaccines, and lockdowns. In other words, the author is asking the question whether compliance to all these rules, as carried out by most Lutheran congregations in the years from 2020 to 2022, was the only proper Christian response, or whether they should have given more consideration to a policy of resistance or civil disobedience.

In his introduction Pastor Zarling relates the practice of his own congregation. He says: “For a time our church suspended in-person worship” but very soon returned to normal practice. In order to accommodate members who were greatly concerned about health issues, Zarling reports that they “added a third Sunday worship service where there was no singing and only people wearing a mask would attend.” But at the other two Sunday services they “still sang all the verses to all the hymns. We still celebrated the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. We offered the people the body of Christ in their hands and the blood of Christ in individual cups and in the chalice.” For a time, the congregation blocked off every other pew, but that practice came to an end at a large funeral, and “we even went back to passing around the offering plate.”

Because the practice at Pastor Zarling’s congregation was very different from other Lutheran churches nearby, Pastor Zarling was asked to present a conference paper to explain their reasons for non-compliance. This book is the end result of that request.

One of the points Zarling raises is the question of who are “*the authorities that exist*” (Romans 13:1). Zarling maintains that since the United States of America is not a monarchy nor a democracy but a constitutional republic, the highest authority for citizens is the United States constitution. The First Amendment prohibits any laws “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Is not any government order calling for the suspension of normal worship or regular Lord’s Supper practice a prohibition of the free exercise of our Christian faith? Of course, there are others who maintain that “*the authorities that exist*” are the actual

ones wielding the authority, whether constitutional or not. Zarling maintains that these are questions that need to be openly discussed among Christians.

In order to help the discussion and understanding of these matters, Zarling presents a discussion of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in the first two chapters. He then moves on to examples from church history (Chapter 3: “Luther’s Warning,” Chapter 4: “The Magdeburg Confession,” and Chapter 5: “Resistance”).

The last chapters encourage readers to be Christian warriors in the bold confession of the truth, in the practice of calling attention to the sins of government officials (like John the Baptist did with Herod), and in our duty as American citizens to fight for the rights granted us in the Constitution. His contention is that Christians today tend to be fearful of being thought weird or out of the mainstream if we speak up or act in accordance with our Christian confession. Zarling believes that today’s American Christians need serious governmental persecution to force them to make a public choice between following Christ or obeying the government.

I believe this book by a pastor of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is worthy of being read and discussed by our pastors and church leaders. Serious discussion is what he is asking for, and he is willing to consider alternate views. The current situation in our country demands a careful Christian response.

Paul M. Tiefel

Johnold J. Strey: *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, Northwestern Publishing House, 2021, paperback, 327 pages.

This is the last in the series, “*People’s Bible Teachings*,” from Northwestern Publishing House. The series covers twenty-five different topics and is written specifically for laypeople.

As one would expect, the author begins first by looking at the Bible passages that are relevant to the topic. There is a nice presentation for “God’s Word in the Purpose of Worship” (Chapter 1) and the “Principles for Worship” (Chapters 3-4). Chapter 2, titled “The Gospel in Worship,” is critical in reminding the reader that the focus in all that is done in worship is on the crucified and risen Savior and on the means of grace—the gospel in word and sacraments. Of particular note is a section concerning adiaphora in Christian worship and a nice review of Christian freedom to be exercised in Christian love.

After laying this Bible-based foundation, the author takes a look at the structure of liturgy (Chapter 5) and explains the different components of the liturgy (Chapters 6-8). These chapters are very helpful in developing, or renewing, a healthy respect for the Christ-centered components of a gospel-oriented liturgy.

Several chapters offer interesting history and details on daily devotions, the church year, and the use of symbolism. One chapter devoted to “Music in Worship” covers different styles and tastes with a balanced approach to the concepts of traditional and contemporary, as well as the use of instruments and choirs.

Finally, there is a very informative chapter on “Myths About Lutheran Worship” that covers the following:

- Myth #1: Martin Luther used bar tunes and other secular music for his hymns.
- Myth #2: Lutherans do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis.
- Myth #3: Lutherans do not display crucifixes.
- Myth #4: Lutherans do not make the sign of the cross.
- Myth #5: Lutherans do not applaud.
- Myth #6: “The liturgy” means “page 15.”
- Myth #7: A Lutheran service is incomplete without a rite of confession and absolution.
- Myth #8: Liturgical worship is a hindrance to evangelism.
- Myth #9: Liturgical worship is unattractive to younger generations.
- Myth #10: Lutherans are against contemporary worship; or Lutherans are in favor of contemporary worship.

The book is enhanced by inclusion of a “Glossary of Worship Terms” and a helpful index of subjects and the 300 or so Bible passages that are used.

Many readers looking for more details will appreciate the 233 endnotes for further research. If the book has one fault, it is the tendency to promote a specific hymnal, though some might view this simply as an attempt to support a mutual project.

Throughout the book, the author highlights the theme found in his last chapter (p. 290-291, emphasis in the original):

“Worship brings Christ’s gifts, won for us in the past, to us today.”

“In public worship we primarily receive God’s gracious gifts.”

“So public worship is first receiving of God’s gifts of forgiving grace.”

That precious truth reforms misconceptions about Bible-based liturgies and leads to a greater appreciation for them. Overall the book should be a welcomed addition to any library (pastor, teacher, layperson, church). It is an easy read that will foster a love for Christian worship and the many blessings that God gives through it.

