

# The superior authority of Jesus in Matthew to interpret the *Torah*



**Author:**  
Francois P. Viljoen<sup>1</sup>

**Affiliation:**  
<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Theology,  
North-West University,  
Potchefstroom Campus,  
South Africa

**Corresponding author:**  
Francois Viljoen,  
viljoen.francois@nwu.ac.za

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The arguments posed in this article serve to demonstrate the underlying conflict and struggle for authority in the Matthean Gospel. This struggle signifies part of the debate of those days about the trustworthy keepers of the *Torah*. Whilst Josephus wrote that the Pharisees were regarded as the most accurate interpreters of the *Torah*, Matthew argues the opposite. Matthew pictures several scenes in which these groups oppose Jesus by trying to discredit his authority and knowledge to interpret the *Torah*. Matthew time and again exposes their malice, whilst he demonstrates the authority and wisdom of Jesus to contrast them. This article discusses a variety of depictions of Jesus in Matthew that demonstrates his authority and worthiness to provide the true interpretation of the *Torah*. Built on such arguments, Matthew concludes his Gospel by asserting the authority of Jesus and his command for obedience to everything that he has commanded.

## Introduction

The argument between the Jewish leaders and Jesus about the true or best interpretation of the *Torah*<sup>1</sup> forms a constant theme in the first Gospel. In the time of Matthew it seems that various Jewish groups debated questions about the meaning and practice of the *Torah* and about the authority to interpret it (Carter 2000:140; Cohen 2006:123; Foster 2004:2; Saldarini 1994:5). Various localised groupings with a mutual emphasis on *Torah* conservation and interpretation replaced the temple-based worship (Neusner 1979:42; Van Aarde 2011:46). Therefore the Law developed as a central symbol in Jewish religion. The group that would be recognised as the most authoritative and accurate interpreters of the Law, would become the dominant force. Josephus described the Pharisees as the most accurate interpreters of the Law (Jewish Wars 1.5.1; 2.8.14).<sup>2</sup>

Matthew's text reveals an underlying conflict and struggle for authority (Stanton 1993:26). It seems that this struggle should probably be attributed to the strenuous Jewish-Christian relations of the 1st century (e.g. Hummel 1966:55; Keener 1999:46; Repschinski 2000:63ff.; Saldarini 1994:46). This struggle apparently mainly focused on being the real keepers of God's Law. In their aspiration to precisely meet the obligations of the Law, Jewish groups of those days engaged in competitive disputes as to what the obligations of the *Torah* meant. Each group claimed to be living according to the principles of the *Torah*, but in doing so implied that others were not (Dunn 2003:292). Although on the surface it seems that Jesus and his followers are the victims in such conflict scenes, Jesus and his followers in an ironic manner emerge as the victors in these scenes, demonstrating the superior authority of Jesus.

In this article it is argued that Matthew depicts Jesus as the one who has the decisive authority and knowledge above opposing Jewish leaders and that he therefore has the authority to provide the ultimate interpretation of the *Torah* as God intended it to be. The following arguments are presented to substantiate the point:

- Jesus is presented as the representative of God.
- Jesus is a Moses-like figure.
- Jesus emerges as the victor in conflict scenes.
- Jesus, who has the authority, commands that his interpretation of the *Torah* be taught.

## Jesus is the representative of God

Matthew in several ways states that Jesus is the representative of God amongst his people, which would infuse him with special knowledge and wisdom.

1.The Hebrew word *Torah* (תּוֹרָה) is a term used to denote a wide range of meanings (Meier 2009:26–40). The broad semantic domain for *Torah* refers to the Law of Moses with its provisions as preserved in the Pentateuch (cf. Lindars 1988).

2.See Viljoen (2015a) for a more detailed discussion on the variegated Jewish context in which the Matthean Gospel was written.

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## Jesus is God amongst his people

God's presence forms a significant motif in Matthew's Gospel as the evangelist picks up the theme of the *Shekinah*<sup>3</sup> of Yahweh in the First Testament. God the Father is spoken of as in heaven (Mt 6:9), whilst Jesus is with his people (Davies & Allison 2004a:217). Matthew describes Jesus as the representative and embodiment of God amongst his people who can therefore act with God-given authority.

At the beginning of his Gospel Matthew writes about the name of Jesus: "... they will call him Immanuel," which means "God with us" (Μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ Θεός)<sup>4</sup> (Mt 1:23). This Christological title implies that Isaiah 7:14 has been fulfilled in Jesus (Davies & Allison 2004a:217; Hagner 1993:20; Menken 2004:12; Nolland 2005:100; Viljoen 2007:698–718). According to Jewish tradition God had been with his people in the past (Nm 23:21; Dt 2:7), but he would be with them in a special way in the messianic age (Is 43:5; Ezk 34:30). Although 'Immanuel' was not literally the name of Jesus, this name described his messianic work metaphorically by establishing the presence of God amongst his people (Hagner 1993:20; Osborne 2010:79).

Matthew likewise ends his Gospel with this Christological theme by stating the promise of the omnipresence of Jesus: 'And surely I am with you always (ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας), to the very end of the age' (Mt 28:20). This statement once again recalls many biblical texts about God being with his people (e.g. Gn 24; 26:3; 28:15; 31:3; 48:21; Mi 6:8) (Davies & Allison 2004c:687; Hagner 1995:888; Lee & Viljoen 2010:66). Matthew parallels the presence of Jesus with the presence of God. Jesus remains with his disciples throughout human history until the consummation, now as the risen Jesus (Nolland 2005:1271). An eschatological promise is interwoven into the present. Jesus' promise of his presence should be read in light of the full authority he asserted for himself in Matthew 28:18. Jesus is described as the authoritative and omnipresent risen one, ruling and commanding his disciples to teach his teachings (Mt 28:16–20) (Nolland 2005:1271; Osborne 2010:1082).

Furthermore, Matthew describes the omnipresence of Jesus in the church, 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them'; ('οὗ γὰρ εἰσιν δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἔμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν') (Mt 18:20) (Viljoen 2009:656). Luz (2001a:458) describes the presence of Jesus in the church as '... the Christological center of the entire chapter'. Gathering in Jesus' name expresses a conscious choice of identification with Jesus. It implies the experience

3. In classic Jewish thought, the *Shekinah* refers to the dwelling or settling of God's divine presence (Hagner 1995:533). In the Old Testament the God's *Shekinah* is presented by the pillar of fire and cloud during the exodus and where the wings of the seraphim meet above the ark.

4. The words of Matthew's translation are found in LXX Isaiah 8:8; 10: 'But if two sit together and words of the Law (are spoken) between them, the Divine Presence rests between them' (m. 'Abot 3.20); 'If three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Law, it is as if they had eaten from the table of the God' (m. 'Abot 3.3); 'If ten men sit together and occupy themselves in the Law, the Divine Presence rests among them, for it is written, God stands in the congregation of God ... in every place where I record my name I will come unto thee and I will bless thee' (m. 'Abot 3:6).

of unity with him and to be under his authority (cf. Mt 7:22; 10:22; 18:5) (Hagner 1995:533; Nolland 2005:750). This probably reflects a view that was common in rabbinic Judaism that, where two or three study the *Torah* together, the *Shekinah* glory is in their midst (Davies & Allison 2004a:790; Hagner 1995:533; Nolland 2005:751).

It therefore seems that Matthew 18:20 is a Christian reformulation of common Jewish statements. Jesus becomes the effulgence of God's glory and his Law. He is regarded as the *Shekinah* of God. As in the *Mishnah*, the *Shekinah* of God is not limited to a geographical space. In the Gospel the *Shekinah* of God is linked to Jesus' presence. Jesus mediates God's presence (Nolland 2005:751).

Beyond these explicit statements, the theme of Jesus being with people is found throughout the Matthean Gospel (Mt 9:15; 17:17), significantly so in the passion narrative (Mt 26:11, 18, 20, 23, 29, 38, 50–51, 69, 71) and where Jesus helps his disciples (Mt 8:23–27; 14:13–21, 22–23; 15:29–39; 17:1–8; 26:26–29) (cf. Luz 2001b:634).

Based on all these statements and references, it seems that the promise of the presence of God in Jesus forms an important Christological theme in this Gospel. This does not only imply divine presence, but also divine assistance in his ministry and teaching.

## Jesus is the beloved Son of God

Matthew presents Jesus as ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ [the Son of God] to form Jesus' fundamental title in Matthew (Davies & Allison 2004a:339; Kingsbury 1976:591; Senior 1998:54). The title 'Son of God' was an important title emphasising both status and relationships (Nolland 2005:158). The title contains various connotations both in Judaism as in the Roman Empire (Davies & Allison 2004a:340). In the imperial world the authority of the emperor was strengthened by the religious connotation to his position and in Judaism it was a messianic title.

The Roman emperor had the honorary title of *Caesar divi filius* [Son of God]. Based on this title he received special intellectual and moral authority. The *salus rei publicae* [the welfare/salvation of the republic] depended on this position of the Caesar. In 42 BCE Octavian was first to use the title *divi filius* to advance his political position in the process of finally overcoming all rivals for power within the Roman state. This was displayed on coins that he issued which became a useful propaganda tool for this position. The title 'Augustus' was officially conferred on Octavian in 27 BCE. The title *divi filius* was also claimed by some of Augustus's successors, namely, Tiberius, Nero and Domitian (Southern 2014:63).

Matthew presents Jesus as the Son born of a virgin who represents God in a unique manner amongst his people (Mt 1:23) (Viljoen 2011a:331). With Jesus' baptism a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is the beloved Son of God. Matthew uses the highly Christological quotation, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου

ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα (this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased) (Mt 3:17) a reference that is repeated at his transfiguration (Mt 17:5). Keener (1999:134) describes this as a '... public theophany and testimony to Jesus'. The voice from heaven is closely tied to a number of allusions to the Hebrew Bible, namely Genesis 22:2; Exodus 4:22–23; Psalms 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 (Nolland 2005:157). It seems that the allusion to Psalm 2 is particularly relevant in Matthew. Psalm 2 is a coronation psalm for King David so that this allusion demonstrates that Jesus by the Spirit was the messianic anointed king of kings (Osborne 2010:125).<sup>5</sup> Jesus is even recognised as Son of God by the demons (Mt 8:29), and he demonstrates his authority over nature (Mt 14:33). The high priest refers to Jesus as such and he accepts it (Mt 26:63). The centurion also acknowledges him as the Son of God (Mt 27:54). In the parable of the tenants (Mt 21:37) the Matthean Jesus refers indirectly to himself as the Son of God. Towards his disciples he identifies himself directly as the Son of God with reference to the coming of the son of man (Mt 24:36).

By quoting the servant song, ἰδοὺ ὁ παῖς μου ὃν ἠρέτισα, ὁ ἀγαπητός μου ὃν εὐδόκησεν ἢ ψυχὴ μου ... (here is my Son whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight ...) in Matthew 12:18–21, Matthew affirms that Isaiah's prophecy has reached its fulfilment. This passage asserts that Jesus is God's chosen one. According to Isaiah 42:1–4 the servant (Jesus the Messiah for Matthew; cf. Mt 12:18–21) would bring *מִשְׁפָּט* (judgement) and *תּוֹרָה* (*Torah*) (cf. Nm 24:17; Dt 18:18–19; Is 52:7; 61:2–3; Dn 9:25) (Viljoen 2013a:5). These expectations clarify Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the one who brought the 'messianic *Torah*' (Gerhardsson 1964:327; Viljoen 2011b:7). He therefore has the ultimate authority when it comes to the interpretation of the *Torah*. It is highly significant that Matthew used ὁ παῖς (son) rather than δούλος (slave/servant). He changed both the MT (*עֶבֶד*, servant) and LXX (*δοῦλος*, slave). In this way Matthew links this quotation to the highly Christological quotation, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα (this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased), which occurs at Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:17) and at his transfiguration (Mt 17:5) (Luz 2001a:193). The servant is also the Son (Nolland 2005:492). The progression of thought in the servant song is significant (Osborne 2010:466) as demonstrated in Box 1.

This progression of thought counters the growing conflict in the narrative. Whilst the Pharisees reject the ministry and teaching of Jesus and plan to kill him, Jesus, in contradiction, is clearly identified as the chosen Messiah who has come to fulfil God's will, who is deeply loved by the Father, and the Father delights in him.

**BOX 1:** Progression of thought in the servant song of Matthew 12:18.

|   |
|---|
| Jesus is the Son and Servant, the gentle Messiah who fulfills Isa. 42 and 53. |
| He is the one chosen to fulfill God's will.                                   |
| He is deeply loved by the Father.   |
| He brings deep pleasure of his Father.  |

<sup>5</sup>It is noteworthy that Jesus' status as Son of God becomes Satan's key challenge in the temptation narrative (Matt 4:1–11).

## Jesus is greater than the temple

In the Sabbath controversy, also found in the other Synoptic Gospels (Mk 2:23–28; Lk 6:1–5), Matthew is unique in introducing the Christological statement τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεῖζόν<sup>6</sup> ἐστὶν ὃδε (one greater than the temple is here) (Mt 12:6). As the temple has been the focus of God's presence amongst his people, the Matthean statement implies that in Jesus, God is to be found much better than in the temple (France 2008:207). This was a strong claim to make, as the temple was seen as the centre of Israel's religious and political tradition. The temple was much more than a religious building. It was the focus of national identity and the visible symbol that Israel was the chosen people of Yahweh. In the aftermath of 70 CE, with the cultic vacuum left by the destruction of the temple, this claim of Matthew must have resounded strongly (Viljoen 2011b:5). The Matthean Jesus presents himself as God's agent and the one through whom God authoritatively carries out functions previously associated with the temple (Carter 2000:266). If the temple has more authority than the Sabbath because it manifests the presence of God, then Jesus (who is the replacement and fulfilment of the role of the temple) has even more authority than the Sabbath (Mt 12:8) (Morris 1992:303; Senior 1998:137). As the priests were guiltless whilst working in the temple on the Sabbath (as the temple had authority over the Sabbath), so much more are the disciples of Jesus as they are in his presence. The authority and presence of Jesus therefore create new attitudes and new ways of observance of the Sabbath and stipulations of the Law (McIver 1995:242).

## Jesus bears the Spirit of God

As Messianic servant, Jesus has an intimate relationship with the Spirit of God. Isaiah writes as follows about the Messianic servant: 'The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him ... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD ...' (Is 11:2), and 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations' (Is 42:1). Matthew frequently indicates this relation between the Spirit and Jesus.

Matthew states that Jesus is born by the Spirit. Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit (ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου, Mt 1:18). The angel confirmed this to Joseph that what was conceived in her, was from the Holy Spirit (ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου ἐστὶν ἁγίου, Mt 1:20). The origin of Jesus is divine. As the Spirit was present in the original creation (Gn 1–2), he is also recreating the messianic era through Jesus (Osborne 2010:75). From Jesus' conception the divine providence is at work in him.

As Jesus came up out of the water after his baptism, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove (πνεῦμα θεοῦ

<sup>6</sup>It should be recognised that the comparative μεῖζόν is in the neuter form. It could therefore be argued that it could better be translated with 'something' and not with 'someone'. However, similar neuter uses of μεῖζόν appear in Matthew 12:41–42 that undoubtedly refer to the persons of Jonah and Solomon in contrast to Jesus himself. Turner (1965:21) remarked that grammatically the neuter can be used to refer to persons if the emphasis was less on the individual than on some outstanding general quality. Gundry (1994:223) explained this specific occurrence accordingly when he remarked that the neuter gender stressed the quality of Jesus' superior greatness rather than his personal identity.

καταβαίνον ὡσεὶ περιστερὰν ἐρχόμενον ἐπ’ αὐτόν; Mt 3:16). The imagery of the dove probably echoes the Spirit of God that hovered over creation (Gn 1:2) and the dove that returned to the ark of Noah (Gn 8:8–12). The dove as messenger signifies the divine role of Jesus. He is inaugurated as Son of God and the Messiah (Osborne 2010:125).

The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνήχθη εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος, πειρασθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου, Mt 4:1). Divine authority leads the story (Osborne 2010:136). Shortly after the Holy Spirit has descended upon Jesus, he is led out to confront the devil. The devil does not succeed with his temptation. He is completely defeated and leaves Jesus and is replaced by angels (τότε ἀφῆσιν αὐτόν ὁ διάβολος, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄγγελοι προσῆλθον καὶ διηκόνουν αὐτῷ, Mt 4:11).

In the Sabbath controversy, Matthew again introduces Jesus as the bearer of the Spirit (θήσω τὸ Πνεῦμά μου ἐπ’ αὐτόν – I will put my Spirit on him) (Mt 12:18) (Viljoen 2011b:7). This attests to Jesus’ authority in claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath in the preceding story (Mt 12:8). His bearing of the Spirit is also demonstrated in his healing of the man with the shrivelled hand (Mt 12:9–14). Matthew compares Jesus with the Pharisees, whose synagogue (ἡ συναγωγὴ αὐτῶν – their synagogue) (Mt 12:9) lacks the Spirit and who are not able to recognise the bearer of the Spirit.

In response to the accusation of the Pharisees that Jesus casts demons out through Beelzebub, he states that the Spirit is the true source of his power to cast out the demons (δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, Mt 12:28). The Spirit is the true source of his ministry. Jesus has the authority to conquer powers as the Spirit fills him.

### The authority of Jesus as representative of God

The abovementioned themes illustrate how Matthew emphasises the authority of Jesus being the representative of God. This serves Matthew’s argument that Jesus has the ultimate authority for the true interpretation of the *Torah* in the society where it seems that this issue was paramount.

## Jesus is a Moses-like figure who teaches and ministers with authority

### As Moses-like figure Jesus teaches on the mount

In the Sermon on the Mount<sup>7</sup> Matthew alludes to Moses when presenting Jesus (Viljoen 2011c:388). Some scholars even refer to Jesus as being presented as the new Moses (cf. Allison 1993:137–270; Floor 1969:34). The setting of the sermon is stated at the beginning when Jesus goes up the

7.The Sermon on the Mount forms the first of five great discourses in the Gospel: the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), the missionary charge (Mt 10:5–42), the parables discourse (Mt 13:3–52), instructions to the community (Mt 18:3–35), and the woes and eschatological discourse (Mt 23–25). These five discourses serve as main building blocks or architectural structure of the first Gospel. Some scholars have seen in this structure an allusion to the five books of the Pentateuch (cf. Bacon 1930:48), an idea that fits into Matthew’s overall emphasis on the Law.

mountain to teach (Mt 5:1–2). The Sinai typology is noticeable from this setting (Loader 1997:165). This opening leads to an anticipation of a teaching to be delivered by a Law-giver. This expectation is met when Jesus confirms the continuing validity of the Law (Mt 5:17–20) (Viljoen 2011c:385–408), repeatedly refers to the meaning and intention of the Law, and elaborates on the Decalogue in six antitheses (Mt 5:21–47) (Viljoen 2013b:1–12). Matthew alludes to a well-known Jewish concept that the Mosaic character could transmigrate to later legislators and teachers.<sup>8</sup> Within this convention, Jesus is portrayed as teacher and revealer comparable to Moses. Matthew draws a parallel between Jesus and Moses, both as mediators of the commandments of God.

Matthew seven times strategically uses ἤλθον-statements<sup>9</sup> (Mt 5:17 [2x]; 9:13; 10:34 [2x]; 35; 20:28) to explain Jesus’ God-given mission (Guelich 1982:134–135). In Matthew 5:17 Jesus uses such a statement to affirm his adherence to the true intention of the *Torah*. As Moses had a God-given mission to present God’s Law, so does Jesus also have a God-given mission.

The authority of Jesus’ teaching is explicitly mentioned as Matthew concludes the sermon with its Sinai typology with a postscript: ‘[T]he crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority (ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων), and not as their teachers of the law’ (Mt 7:28–29) (Viljoen 2012:6).

Whilst the sermon begins with a series of blessings (Mt 5:1–12), it ends with a series of warnings (Mt 7:1, 15, 21, 26–27). This pattern is similar to the Book of the Law (Dt), which suggests a parallel between Jesus and Moses, both as mediators of the commandments of God (Domeris 1990:67).

### As Moses-like figure Jesus performs miracles

Matthew then proceeds with the narrative by telling that Jesus came down from the mountain. Matthew inserts the transition from the sermon on the mount to the miracle story (καταβάντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄρους, Mt 8:1), which almost identically parallels the LXX version of Moses’ descent from Sinai (καταβαίνοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄρους) (Ex 34:29). He thus draws a parallel between Jesus and Moses, and the mount of Jesus’ sermon and Mount Sinai (Carter 2000:198; Davies & Allison 2004a:9; Luz 2001a:5). The impressive and authoritative teacher of the Law found in the discourse is subsequently presented in the narrative as going into action to demonstrate how the Law should be practiced. As Moses in Exodus performed ten miracles, acted the contents of the Law and taught it, Jesus authoritatively interprets the Law in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) and then authoritatively

8.This comparison between Jesus and Moses echoes expectations found in Jewish literature. Baruch emerges as God’s agent who truly instructs the righteous community (2 Bar 38:1–4). Baruch is paralleled with Moses as Baruch left his people and ascended Mount Zion to receive God’s instructions. Like Moses, Baruch is portrayed as God’s law-giver. Ezra appears as Moses *redivivus*: ‘I revealed myself in the bush, and spoke to Moses, ... So too I now give this order to you’ (4 Ezr 14: 3–7).

9.On form-critical grounds Von Harnack (1912:1–30) has identified these statements with, *die ausdrücklichen Selbstzeugnisse Jesu über den Zweck seiner Sendung und seines Kommes*.

performs his interpretation of the Law in the miracle narratives (Mt 8–9) (Viljoen 2014a:4). The contrast between the plagues by Moses and the healing of Jesus is significant. The miracle narratives in Matthew depict the authority (ἐξουσία)<sup>10</sup> of Jesus over illness, nature, demons, paralysis, disabilities and death (Osborne 2010:280). Micah prophesied that Israel and Judah would experience a new exodus from exile: ‘As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders’ (Mic 7:15). Some early Christians applied this prophesy to the ministry of Jesus: ‘As Moses did signs and miracles, so also did Jesus. And there is no doubt but that the likeness of the signs proves him (Jesus) to be that prophet of whom he (Moses) said that he should come “like myself”’ (Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 1.57).

### This Moses-like figure has superior authority

Matthew’s comparison of Jesus with Moses is significant, both as teacher of the *Torah* and as performer of ten miracles. Matthew draws the parallel between Jewish expectations of a new Moses that would come, and Jesus who fulfils this character. Matthew in this manner asserts Jesus’ authority to provide the true intention of the *Torah*.

## Jesus emerges as the victor in conflict scenes

Matthew depicts Jesus in several conflict scenes with the Pharisees about the meaning of the *Torah* (e.g. Mt 12:1–14; 15:1–20; 22:24–40). It is significant that Jesus time and again emerges as the victor from these scenes.

### Jesus the victor in the challenge about the greatest commandment

The scene in which Jesus is challenged by an expert of the *Torah* (νομικός)<sup>11</sup> in a *Streitgespräch*<sup>12</sup> on the greatest commandment (Mt 22:34–45) is most significant.<sup>13</sup> In response to the challenge of this expert, Jesus victoriously defuses the challenge (Viljoen 2015b:10). A central pattern of such a *Streitgespräch* is the interaction of challenge and riposte (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:42; Repschinski 2000:262–272). The intention of the expert of the *Torah* is depicted as undermining Jesus’ reputation, to expose his ignorance and therefore to ridicule him. However, Jesus rather acquires honour by his skilful riposte to this challenge.<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees

10. Of the nine verses where Ἐξουσία [authority] is found in Matthew, four occur in the miracle narratives (Mt 8:9; 9:6, 8 and 19:1).

11. This is the only time Matthew uses the word νομικός. Obviously Matthew wants to emphasise that the questioner should be regarded as a daunting interlocutor about this crucial legal issue (regarding the νόμος) at stake (Gerhardsson 1976:133; Osborne 2010:822).

12. Bultmann (1963:11–61) has identified four elements in *Streitgespräche*: they provide an action or attitude; which is used by opponents; in an attack in the form of a question or accusation; and the attack is followed by a reply, often including a counter-question or a quotation from scripture.

13. Bornkamm (1954:85–93) has expounded how Matthew turns the didactic narrative (*Schulgespräch*) of Mark on the greatest commandment (which has an amiable tone) into a conflict narrative (*Streitgespräch*) (which has a controversial tone). Although Mark 12:28–34 is usually described as a *Schulgespräch*, an ironic dialogue does not really fit into the series of preceding conflict stories and Jesus’ attack on the scribes that follows. Notably Luke 10:25 also presents the story as a *Streitgespräch*: ‘ἐκτεράζων αὐτὸν’ (testing him).

14. Honour and shame were pivotal values in ancient Mediterranean societies (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:76; Witherington 2013:47).

witness Jesus’ victory in this *Streitgespräch*. This expert of the Law and his fellow Pharisees are silenced. Jesus then continues by asking a question of his own: ‘What do you think of the Messiah?’ (Mt 22:42). Matthew concludes with the climactic ending, ‘... no one dared ask him any more questions’. Jesus emerges as the clear victor and the respect the disciples and crowds have for Jesus increases.

### Jesus the victor in the challenge about the Sabbath Law

When entering the synagogue on the Sabbath Jesus’ opponents were looking for a reason to accuse him and asked him whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus responds and heals the man with the shrivelled hand (Mt 12:9–13). Matthew mentions no direct counter-response to Jesus, but the Pharisees left the synagogue and plotted how they might kill him (Mt 12:14). As we have no evidence that any sect in early Judaism had rules that would allow putting someone to death for healing on the Sabbath, such plotting to kill would have been considered premeditated murder (Gn 9:5–6; Nm 35:29–34). The reaction of the Pharisees in the story demonstrates their utter misunderstanding of God’s intention with the *Torah* and forms a shameful contrast with Jesus’ good deed. Matthew harshly describes the Pharisees as people with a lack of understanding (cf. Mt 11:25)<sup>15</sup> as they fail to recognise the association between law observance and mercy (Hinkle 1998:360; Repschinski 2000:101). They rather proceed to break the Law in their fervour to remove Jesus. The evangelist proceeds to tell how many followed Jesus and that he continued to heal all their sick (Mt 12:15). Matthew then uses a fulfilment quotation to state that Jesus is the promised one, the servant Messiah, who came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (Is 42:1–4). With this portrait of Jesus, the Christological authority of Jesus is illuminated in contrast with the devious conduct of the Pharisees (Viljoen 2011b:7).

### Jesus the victor in the challenge about the tradition of handwashing

In response to the objection of the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus’ disciples ate with unwashed hands (Mt 15:1), Jesus responds by defining the ‘tradition of the elders’ (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων) (Mt 15:2, 3) as human ‘teaching of teachings’. He rejects the teachings based on their human ideas. Jesus argues that his disciples do not follow the tradition of the Pharisees, because the Pharisees do not follow the commandment of God (‘τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ’) (Mt 15:3) or the word of God (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ) (Mt 15:6). Ironically, the παράδοσις (tradition) was intended to form a fence around the written *Torah* (Hagner 1995:430; Osborne 2010:585), but Jesus accuses the Pharisees that this very fence causes them (διὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ὑμῶν, for the sake of your tradition) to break God’s commandments. Despite this strong riposte, the Pharisees and scribes do not respond to Jesus. Jesus proceeds to address the crowd and his disciples respectively (Mt 15:10–20). The *Streitgespräch* ends with Jesus victoriously making the final statement: ‘Eating with unwashed hands, does not make one

clean' (Mt 15:19). Jesus uses irony to expose untrue human piety and external purity by comparing it with true piety and internal purity (Viljoen 2014b:10).<sup>15</sup>

### The victor of the conflict scenes demonstrates superior understanding of the *Torah*

In these three scenes Jesus is challenged by Pharisees and teachers of the Law on the meaning of the *Torah*. Matthew describes how Jesus time and again emerges as victor in these conflict scenes. Matthew in this way also assures his readers of the superior authority of Jesus to interpret the *Torah*.

## Jesus who has all authority commands that his interpretation be taught

The authority of Jesus is clearly stated in the climactic conclusion of the Gospel: 'All authority has been given to me' (Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).<sup>16</sup> 'Therefore go and make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν) (Mt 28:18–20). Matthew claims that Jesus is the all-authoritative Son of God (Davies & Allison 2004c:682; Lee & Viljoen 2010:4). He has authority over all things, also to interpret the scriptures. His interpretation would therefore provide the answer to the correct way of understanding the scriptures, in contrast to the teaching of the Pharisees that is proven wrong throughout the Gospel (Overman 1996:50). Davies and Allison (2004c:686) remark that Jesus brings the *nova lex*, which embraces the *antiqua lex* of Matthew 5:17–20. The disciples of Jesus are commanded to teach others what Jesus taught them. Jesus did not only teach with words, but also through his deeds. In this climactic ending Matthew describes Jesus as the one who lived as the authoritative interpreter and teacher of the scriptures. His teaching serves the salvation of all people.

## Conclusion

The arguments posed in this article serve to demonstrate the underlying conflict and struggle for authority in the Matthean text. This conflict signifies part of the debate about the trustworthy keepers of the *Torah*. It is taken as a point of departure that in the times of Matthew, Jewish groups debated amongst one another the meaning and practice of the *Torah* and the authority to interpret it. As *Torah* conservation and interpretation replaced the temple-based worship in those days, the Law apparently emerged as a central symbol in Jewish religion. The group that was recognised as the most authoritative and accurate interpreters of the Law, would become the dominant force.

15. Similar sentiments about defilement in a moral rather than physical sense, are found in extra-biblical literature. Menander (*frag.* 540) wrote: 'All that brings defilement comes from within', Philo (*Spec. Leg.* 3:209) remarked: 'For the unjust and impious man is in the truest sense unclean', and Sextus (*Sent.* 110) observed: 'A person is not defiled by the food and drink he consumes, but by those acts which result form an evil character' (cf. Davies & Allison 2004b:526–527). Jesus was therefore not the only one in this time to utter such critique.

16. The Son of man, who was once handed over to the power of others, now has the authority over them. It seems that this statement alludes to Daniel 7:13–14.

Whilst Josephus observes that the Pharisees in those days were regarded as the most accurate interpreters of the Law, Matthew argues the opposite. In this Gospel the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are frequently at loggerheads with Jesus about the meaning of the *Torah* and his authority to interpret it. Matthew pictures several scenes in which they oppose Jesus by trying to discredit his authority and knowledge. Matthew time and again exposes the malice of these opponents, whilst in contrast he demonstrates the authority and wisdom of Jesus.

Matthew introduces Jesus as the representative of God. He is God amongst his people, the beloved Son of God, one greater than the temple, and the one who bears the Spirit of God. Furthermore, Matthew depicts Jesus as a Moses-like figure to meet Messianic expectations of one who would bring bring the *Torah* once again, in a renewed form. The Sermon on the Mount resembles Moses who went up Mount Sinai to receive the *Torah*, whilst the block of ten miracles alludes to the ten plagues in Egypt in a positive reverse. Matthew pictures conflict scenes in which Jesus' authority and knowledge to interpret the *Torah* is challenged. When Jesus is challenged about the greatest commandment, the Sabbath Law and the tradition of handwashing, Jesus repeatedly emerges as the clear victor, whilst the malice and ignorance of his challengers is exposed. Built on such arguments, Matthew concludes his Gospel by asserting the ultimate authority of Jesus and his command for obedience to everything that he has commanded.

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