

# Healthy Economies or Cautionary Tales? The Sub-Structural Economies of Four Matthean Healing Stories

A Seminar Paper Presented at the Matthew Section of SBL 2008:  
Reading the Gospel of Matthew within the Global Context

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We begin, as did “Matthew,” with a genealogy of sorts. This work’s ancestor is an earlier research paper that examined the interactions of universal namelessness and gender within the Matthean healing stories.<sup>1</sup> In adapting that paper to the topic of the current Matthew section for SBL 2008, the explicit focus of the original paper on reading gender through an inclusive feminist critical lens has been removed, though the voices of my mothers in biblical studies still echo through the corridors of these written lines.<sup>2</sup> The present work offers a modified type of form analysis that is based not so much on literary forms as on economic exchanges. However, I owe a clear genealogical debt to my historical-critical and literary forebears.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Anderson, “Towards an Inclusive Feminist Critical Reading of Justa and Justus: Structural Economies of Gender and Namelessness in Matthean Healing Stories” (unpublished paper, Graduate Theological Union, May 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In particular, the original paper emerged from theoretical and methodological conversations with: Janice Capel Anderson, “Matthew: Gender and Reading,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001), 25-51; Amy-Jill Levine, “Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001), 70-87; Amy-Jill Levine, “Matthew,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 339-349; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Social History*, Vol. 14, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988); Talvikki Mattila, “Naming the Nameless: Gender and Discipleship in Matthew’s Passion Narrative,” in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, ed. David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 153-179; Gail R. O’Day, “Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001), 114-25; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Elaine M. Wainwright, “Not Without My Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matthew 15:21-28,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001), 126-137; and Elaine M. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Though my own work shows far less elegance and depth than theirs, it has been influenced, albeit post facto, by the form-critical work of Hans Dieter Betz, “The Early Christian Miracle Story: Some Observations on the Form Critical Problem,” *Semeia* 11(1978): 69-81; and Robert W. Funk, “The Form of the New Testament Healing Miracle Story,” *Semeia* 12 (1978): 57-96.

In addition to a genealogy, this paper equally begins with three contexts. The first and most obvious is the context of this SBL seminar, wherein we explore connections between Matthean contexts and our real-world global contexts. The other contexts are more personal, more local. The second one concerns my role as an instructor. I teach New Testament and exegesis to M.Div. students and to lay leaders. Most of the students I encounter are willing, to one degree or another, to critique the Bible for its perceived patriarchalism, sexism, heterosexism, violence, injustice... But very, very rarely are students willing to extend these same critiques to Jesus as he is presented within the gospel texts. God the Father? Have at! But Jesus? Hands off! As an instructor, I wonder how I can help students move beyond this resistance and examine the character of Jesus in a more critical manner.

The third context is that of my life within the community of a mainline denominational church that names itself as progressive and inclusive. As a congregation, we say we want to take the Bible seriously and live out the teachings of Jesus in a responsible, collaborative way in the world, but many of us wonder how to do this. As a member of this community who often teaches adult formation, I wonder how we can more fully engage both the hope and the horror of the biblical texts all while being aware of our local and global contexts.

And so, my own social contexts and this paper's history steadily shape the current incarnation of this paper, in which we will explore the micro-economies of four Matthean healing stories. Within the immediate context of our time together in this seminar, I hope to propose a strategy of critical reading that might help students and parishioners alike to become more unflinching readers of the Jesus who is presented in the Gospels. As a real-time participant in this Matthew forum, I will suggest that such a critical reading strategy may have helpful, localizing implications for some western Christians who, recognizing the complex interactions between

enduring doctrinal ideas of Christ triumphant and the ongoing legacy of western imperialism around the world, hope to play a small part in re-creating a different global reality.

Before beginning, I do feel the need to offer the following caveat: It is not my intent to disrespect theological traditions or to suggest that Christians, among whom I name myself, no longer have a friend in Jesus. Rather, my aims are simply to offer a reading strategy that may help us grapple more fully with the ways the biblical texts enact Jesus and to highlight one or two ways that such a critical engagement might impact how we reenact Jesus, for better and for worse, within local and global settings.

### **Overview of Method and Exegetical Process**

In order to explore one way of reading the Jesus character critically, this paper will focus on four Matthean healing stories, namely those in which a supplicant requests a healing on behalf of another person. (This “supplicant on behalf of another” will hereafter be shorthanded as SOBA, and the story in which this character type appears will be identified as a SOBA account). These four accounts – of the centurion and his servant, the leader and his daughter, the Canaanite woman and her daughter, and the man and his son – are chosen because they demonstrate a similar internal structure, which provides a type of control-of-variable strategy against which variations between the texts can be explored.

Each story will be examined using a modified formal analysis that operationalizes the text’s literary elements through the language of economics. Economics herein is understood in its broadest sense, namely as that which is exchanged, whether tangible or intangible. Key questions using the vocabulary of economics include: Who gives and/or gets (or does not give/not get) what, when, to and/or from whom, and for what purpose? By applying these questions to the local economies of our four texts, a pattern of exchanges emerges. Thus, our first step will be to delineate this general pattern. After this, we will read closely through each SOBA account with two

tasks in mind. Our first aim is to describe how a particular SOBA story enacts the general pattern of textual exchanges, both in its conformity to and divergence from the pattern. Our second task in reading each individual pericope is to assess the type of sub-structural economy that emerges, particularly on the part of Jesus. We know that each person for whom each supplicant pleads will be healed. But what, according to the narrative exchanges, is the local cost of this healing and who must pay the price? We are looking, in short, to identify the micro-economies of Jesus that are embedded below the narrative surface of each text. After pursuing both of these aims in each of the four pericopae, we will summarize our findings and consider their implications for western Christians who are endeavoring to live their theologies more locally and sustainably within a global community.

As we prepare now to begin our exploration of these texts, a word must first be offered as to why I have chosen to operationalize these texts through the language of economic exchanges. First, as I mentioned above, one of my primary motivations is to find a hands-on methodology that will help students read Jesus more critically. I am wondering whether a method that enacts the text through the practical vocabulary of exchange might be one step towards obtaining this outcome. Thus, the following approach is something of an experiment in motion. Second, in my capacity as an erstwhile student of international political economy, I studied economic balkanization within the People's Republic of China and processes of conflict resolution between the PRC and Taiwan. As such, the use of the language of exchange does not feel like a foreign intrusion into the biblical text but rather like a helpful analytical lens. Third, my exegetical interests lie in the greater meeting of critical theories with practical methodologies and exacting exegesis. A method that relies on economic exchanges to read biblical texts may well prove fruitful when used in tandem with theoretical approaches that take seriously issues of power and politics, such as postcolonialism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, and liberation theology.

## **The Four SOBA Accounts: A Structural Overview**

In analyzing these four accounts, a general structural pattern emerges, a pattern that is based on a series of exchanges, or economies, between the supplicant and Jesus. The first exchange, which tends to occur only once, is locational: Jesus and the supplicant each exchange one locale for another. While this exchange on the surface appears to be only a literary device to get Jesus where he needs to be in order to encounter the supplicant, it ought not be overlooked as it is an important moment of economic parity within the text: Jesus leaves one locale for another, while the supplicant leaves a place in order to encounter Jesus. The supplicant's movement towards Jesus is sometimes accompanied by a second movement (e.g., falling at Jesus' feet). Although the locale is not always identified specifically, what seems more significant is the equal exchange of movement. The healing encounter that follows is largely predicated on both parties' movement from one place to another.

The second exchange is the healing exchange, which consists of a cycle of exchanges between the supplicant and Jesus. Once the locational exchange is completed, the SOBA initiates the healing exchange by speaking to Jesus. The SOBA's healing request generally consists of the following elements: titular address to Jesus; statement(s) of the malady and extent of suffering; and request for healing. The order of these elements varies between pericopae. The healing exchange is continued by Jesus, whose healing response is expressed through: vocative address to SOBA or others (not common); statement(s) or action(s) indicating intent to heal; and healing speech or actions. The narrator ends the exchange with a statement concerning the time or immediacy of the healing.

The third exchange is the conflict exchange, which shows the greatest variability between the SOBA texts. This exchange is usually embedded within the healing exchange, thus necessitating that the healing exchange be completed at a later point within the text. The

participants in the conflict are not fixed, and as such the conflict can occur within a character or between characters. The conflicts can involve Jesus, the SOBA, and/or tertiary characters within the pericope. There can be more than one conflict within the text, and some of the conflict exchanges do not merely interrupt the healing exchanges but are part of the healing exchanges themselves. At times the conflict appears to remain unresolved, while in other cases there is resolution.

To summarize in schematic form, the three primary types of exchange and the elements of these exchanges can be represented thusly:

**Table 1**  
**Primary Types and Elements of Economic Exchanges in SOBA Accounts**

<b>Type of Exchange</b>	<b>Enacted by</b>	<b>Potential Elements of the Exchange</b>
Locational	Jesus	Movement onto scene
	SOBA	Movement onto scene
Healing	SOBA	Healing Request: Titular address to Jesus Statement of malady Statement of extent of suffering Request for healing
	Jesus	Healing Response: Vocative address to SOBA or others Statement or action indicating intent to heal Healing speech or actions
	[Narrator]	Statement concerning time or immediacy of healing
Conflict	Jesus, SOBA or tertiary characters	Wide variation. Key commonality is that each conflict derails, but only temporarily, the healing exchange

We consider each SOBA account according to its order within the Matthean text: the centurion, the leader, the Canaanite woman, the man. The text of each pericope is presented in Appendix A (p. 21). The prose explication of each pericope is accompanied by a table that

endeavors to present the salient exchanges of each narrative in shorthand form. The page reference for each table is indicated in the text below. Because not all of the textual details are repeated in the explications below, it may be helpful for the reader to consider each explication in tandem with the appropriate table and pericope translation.

A couple of prefacing notes concerning the tables: First, because the healing exchange is always presented as the second exchange within each pericope and because this exchange is always interrupted by one or more conflict exchanges, the elements of the central healing exchange of each story are tracked in the tables using prime markers (i.e., 2, 2', 2''). Second, although the time of healing and some of Jesus' healing intentions and/or actions are recounted by the narrator rather than through Jesus' direct speech, this element of the healing response is nonetheless listed in the tables by Jesus' name, rather than by the narrator's, as the actions are obviously attributed to the former.

### **Command and Exclusive Economies: The Story of the Centurion (Matthew 8:5-13)**

The story of the centurion – likely a low-ranking gentile officer overseeing about 100 soldiers – begins with a locational exchange as Jesus enters Capernaum and there is approached by the centurion, who comes to beg for the healing of his bedridden and paralyzed servant. (See Table 2, p. 22.) The centurion's healing request begins with a titular address, "lord," and continues with statements of malady and suffering. Interestingly, the centurion does not make any explicit request for healing, an absence that is unique in the SOBA accounts. Nevertheless, there is no pause in the text before Jesus begins his cycle of the healing exchange by announcing his intent to heal via a second locational exchange: "I will come and heal him."

At this point, the centurion himself interrupts the proposed exchange and so introduces an element of conflict into the text. In verses 8 and 9, the centurion gives a detailed explanation for this interruption, which begins with a repetition of the title, lord, and then adds a statement of his

unworthiness to have Jesus come under his roof. The centurion then proposes an alternative exchange based not on a change in location but rather on an analogical understanding of his power and Jesus'. For the centurion states that while he is a man under the command of others, he nonetheless has command over others – soldiers and slaves – to whom he has only to give an order and so it is done. His implication seems to be that Jesus, too, possesses this power over and to an even greater degree than the centurion; therefore, Jesus can give the command at a distance and it will be done. In response to the alternate exchange proposed by the centurion, Jesus “marvels” (θαυμάζω in the 3<sup>rd</sup> singular, 1<sup>st</sup> aorist active), a response usually attributed to those who observe Jesus’ miracles. Further, Jesus approves the centurion’s alternate economy and interprets it as indicative of a great faith unlike anything else he has yet encountered in Israel (v.10). Thus, Jesus himself resolves the conflict introduced by the centurion.

In his very next statement, however, Jesus introduces a second conflict, one that derives from his generalization of the centurion’s explanation and faith: Jesus states that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at table with the great patriarchs of the faith in the kingdom of the heavens. Many who are named as sons of the kingdom, however, will be thrown out into a place of darkness, tears and gnashing teeth (vv. 11, 12). It is important to note that this second conflict is not resolved within the pericope. Instead, at this moment of great narrative tension, Jesus issues a healing command according to the exchange parameters defined by the centurion and thus completes the original healing exchange. The story concludes with a statement of the immediacy of the servant’s cure.

Given this overview of the ways the story of the centurion and his servant enact and diverge from the general pattern of economic exchanges, what observations can we make about the text’s sub-structural economies? Two dominant micro-economies seem to emerge herein, one named by the centurion and one named by Jesus. The microeconomics of the centurion indicates a type of



localized command economy: the centurion gives a command and it is done. But there is a certain poignancy in noticing that this command economy emerges from an economics of stated inadequacy as the centurion notes his own unworthiness vis-à-vis Jesus. We observe, too, that Jesus does not attempt to brush away the centurion's statement of inadequacy. Instead, he accedes to his command economy, as indicated by Jesus' use of the present active imperative, "go," in v. 13. To state it differently, Jesus not only allows this low-level representative of Roman imperialism to establish the parameters of the healing exchange, but he wholeheartedly approves of the centurion because of his proposed economy.<sup>4</sup>

The sub-structural economy of Jesus enacted in this pericope is one that is both subversive and exclusive. We read the subversive economy in Jesus' statement that many outsiders will become insiders (v.11). Thus, expectations concerning who is an outsider are challenged and blurred. Had this been the end of his statement, Jesus' proposed economy would have been a subversive and fairly inclusive one.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Jesus continues and announces that those who are insiders will be made outsiders. As such, the expected economy is subverted, and the new economy is exclusive: According to Jesus, not everyone will be included, and those who call themselves children of the kingdom, those who are already named as insiders, appear to be most at risk of catastrophic exclusion.

### **A Transgressive Economy: The Story of the Leader Whose Daughter Died (Matthew 9:18, 19, 23-25)<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> From where I read as a member of one of the world's most actively (neo-)imperializing countries, I have to admit to finding a certain comfort in the willingness of Jesus to embrace, and not smite, the text's imperial representative. Theoreticians reading from the underside, however, might find in this acceptance a clear statement of how the Jesus character is textually co-opted as a non-revolutionary, non-radical representative of authorial Powers That Be.

<sup>5</sup> Let us note, however, that even this economy would not be fully inclusive: The Greek text uses the word πολλοί (v. 11). Though this word expresses "many" – even "a great many" – it is not the same as "all." (See W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, ed. and trans., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, fourth revised and augmented edition [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952], 694-696.)

<sup>6</sup> Textually, this story surrounds yet another story, namely that of the bleeding woman who is healed. Because the focus here is on the SOBAs, her story is not included as part of the pericope. However, although questions

As a glance at Table 3 (p. 23) indicates, this SOBA pericope deviates the most from the general pattern exhibited within the stories. This text alone begins without the expected locational exchange; instead of Jesus moving into the area, we have only the leader coming to Jesus and falling at his feet, thereby interrupting Jesus' conversation with John's disciples (see vv. 14-18). The leader initiates his healing request without any titular address toward Jesus; instead, his healing request begins with a statement of the ultimate malady: My daughter has just died. His healing request proper is the most detailed of any SOBA story, seeking as it does a specific healing action from Jesus (i.e., come and lay your hand upon her, v. 18) and an explicit expected outcome (i.e., she will live, v. 18). In contrast, the story of the centurion included no healing request, and as we shall see below, the healing requests of the Canaanite woman and the man will include only general imperatives (e.g., have mercy).

Jesus' healing response begins with an indication of healing intent: he and his disciples immediately follow the ruler. Thus, while the beginning of the account includes no locational exchange on Jesus' part, we might perhaps read this first step of his healing response as enacting this missing locational piece. Upon arrival at the leader's home, and before the healing response can be completed, the conflict exchange is inserted: Jesus tells the assembled mourners and musicians that the girl is not dead but only sleeping, and they mock him. Once they are put outside, the healing exchange is completed when Jesus grasps the girl's hand and raises her back to life. Embedded within her return to life is an implicit resolution to the conflict: Jesus' actions prove his statement of her condition to be correct, thus resolving the tension. Though the impact of the girl's restoration upon the crowd is not directly reported, verse 26, with its statement of the report going out into all the land, leads us to believe that they, too, will surely hear of the miraculous outcome.

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concerning the interplay and reciprocity/reinforcement between these two stories are beyond the scope of this work, they appear literarily and economically important and merit consideration at another time.

One predominant sub-structural economy is revealed in this story, and it is a micro-economy that is singularly and strongly transgressive, by which is meant an economy that violates the expected or normal rules of exchange. Despite the apparent finality of his daughter's condition, the leader nonetheless voices a demand for healing that is astonishing not only for its obvious assumption of a transgressive economy – the leader assumes that Jesus can raise the dead – but also for the forthright boldness that undergirds the assumption. The leader does not frame his request in the language of possibility but rather of certainty: Come and lay your hand upon her and she will live. He assumes that Jesus can transgress the economy of death and so exchange it for life.

Equally as striking as the leader's assumption of a transgressive economy is Jesus' tacit acceptance of this economy. He does not attempt to dissuade the leader or lower his expectations. It is not to the ruler that he suggests the daughter is merely sleeping, nor does he advise that the dead should be left to tend the dead. Indeed, he does not speak at all but gets up and follows him to the place where life has turned to death. Jesus' acceptance of the transgressive economy is further evidenced when he names this not-death-but-life economy aloud to the gathered crowd that, unwilling or unable to accept such a transgressive exchange, responds laughingly and is hence denied the opportunity of witnessing the proposed transaction. The leader's and Jesus' faith in this transgressive economy is justified, however, when the ultimate exchange of life into death is undone by the girl's restoration.

One further observation about this transgressive micro-economy bears note. Though there is ongoing debate among scholars as to whether the ruler is Jewish or gentile,<sup>7</sup> either interpretation places the ruler within the retainer class, thereby suggesting that this leader would have played a

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2006), 202, 203, who reads the ruler as a leader of the synagogue contra Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 247, who read the ruler as a gentile.

role in mediating and enforcing the power of the ruling elite over the majority of the population.<sup>8</sup>

As such, the ruler, like the centurion, is a person who is both under the power of others but equally in a position of power over others. Though Jesus does not praise the ruler as he did the centurion, he nonetheless shares his micro-economy and submits immediately to the ruler's imperative that Jesus come with him. Once again, then, we encounter no criticism by Jesus of what is at least low-level power over others; instead, we read economic congruence and a willingness on the part of Jesus to engage the ruler as he is.

#### **An Inclusive and Sufficient Economy: The Story of the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28)**

Given the textual identification of this story's lead female character as a non-Israelite, Jesus' earlier pronouncement in the centurion's story of a subverted economy wherein outsiders become insiders (8:11) would seem to be very good news for her as she requests a healing for her daughter. Alas, such is not the case. (See Table 4, page 24.) Instead, following a uniquely blurry locational exchange, the woman begins the healing exchange by pleading for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter and by using a double titular assignation, "lord, son of David," the most elaborate of the SOBA stories (v.22). Her request is fully aborted by Jesus, however, who gives no indication of his intent to heal but rather ignores her completely (v. 23a).

The disciples then introduce the first conflict exchange, asking Jesus to send the woman away as she continues to cry out after them. What is not clear from the text is whether this might be a veiled healing request: Are the disciples asking Jesus to heal the woman, knowing that she will then go away and stop importuning them? This conflict is not resolved, however, as Jesus refuses to be involved even this much with the woman. Instead, he explains his actions (and one wonders whether the woman is within hearing range) by articulating that he was sent only to the lost sheep of

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<sup>8</sup> William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 61, 62; Evert-Jan Vledder, *Conflict in the Miracle Stories: A Socio-Exegetical Study of Matthew 8 and 9*, JSNT Supplement Series 152 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 123.

the house of Israel (v. 24), an economy that directly contradicts the one of welcomed outsiders expressed by Jesus in the story of the centurion.

Whether or not the woman hears Jesus' rebuff, she reprises her request for healing: Lord, help me. Again, Jesus indicates no intent to heal, but this time, he does appear to respond directly to the woman: It is not good to throw the children's bread to the doggies (v. 26). Though the woman initially assents to Jesus' statement, she then immediately introduces the second conflict exchange by challenging Jesus and observing that even the doggies eat crumbs from their masters' table (v. 27). The woman's retort somehow impacts Jesus, and this second conflict is resolved as Jesus vocatively addresses the woman and names her faith as great. The pericope ends as Jesus finally completes the healing exchange by granting the woman's desire, whereby her daughter is immediately healed (v. 28).

In analyzing the sub-structural economies of this account, we encounter what appears to be one economy viewed from two different perspectives. Jesus speaks of an economy that is exclusive and limited. From his perspective, there is only enough for those inside the house of Israel; there is not enough to share with any who are not already at the household's table.

For her part, the woman seems to accept the framework of this micro-economy when, in response to Jesus' contention that it is not good to throw the children's food to the doggies, she answers, "yes, indeed, lord" (v. 27). However, she then suggests a lens with a wider angle, one that allows Jesus to see more clearly the reality of his limited economy as it already exists. And this reality, so the woman, is one where the little dogs are already standing near the table gulping down the bits dropped – intentionally? unintentionally? – by their masters at the table. What is fascinating about this statement is that the woman is not proposing an alternative economy. Rather, she seems to understand, as does Jesus, a limited economy; there is no sense of overflowing super-abundance within her economy. And yet, whereas Jesus' limited economy is exclusive because of assumed

insufficiency, the woman's limited economy is nonetheless both inclusive and sufficient. There is no sense of excess or surplus in her micro-economy, but there is adequacy. There is an assumption of enough for everyone.

It is interesting to read this story alongside that of the centurion. In both accounts, the non-Israelite character has faith that is praised by Jesus, although at different times in the story and to different extents. In the story of the centurion, Jesus grapples with the question of what happens to insiders and outsiders precisely because of what he perceives to be the centurion's tremendous faith. In that story, however, his conclusion is that many, but not all, outsiders will become insiders at the table of the great patriarchs, while those already reclining at the table will not only be moved away from the table but cast entirely out of the household into a place of darkness, tears and gnashing teeth. In the story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus again wrestles with the question of what happens to outsiders. Here, the table is expanded, and the outsider's presence is recognized without any corresponding, quid-pro-quo expulsion of someone already at the table. Dare we hope that Jesus' economy has become, like the woman's, both inclusive and sufficient for all?

#### **(In)Complete Economies: The Story of the Man with an Epileptic Son (Matthew 17:14-18)**

Our final SOBA account, that of the man with an epileptic son, tells of an interrupted economy that is later brought to completion. (See Table 5, page 25.) The story begins with a locational exchange wherein Jesus leaves behind the mountain of the transfiguration and the man emerges from the crowd to kneel before him. The man initiates the healing exchange with the titular address of lord and moves on to request a healing for his son. He gives a detailed statement and explanation of the son's malady and suffering: he is epileptic and suffers terribly due to his tendency to fall into water and fire (v. 15). The healing exchange is then interrupted as the man recounts an anterior healing request, one that he had made of the disciples. They could not,

however, heal the boy, and so the requested exchange remained incomplete, not for lack of desire on the part of the disciples but rather for their lack of ability.

Jesus then begins his healing response, but interestingly, his first words are not directed to the man in his distress. Indeed, of all the SOBAs, this man has the unique distinction of receiving from Jesus no word or action directed immediately towards him in response to his healing plea. Instead, Jesus' words are vocatively directed towards his disciples, and perhaps others in the crowd as well: Oh, faithless and depraved generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? (v. 17). Harsh and forceful, Jesus' criticism of the disciples serves to introduce the story's conflict exchange. It should be noted that the conflict exchange is not completed until vv. 19 and 20, which follow the conclusion of the healing story proper. In these verses, the disciples reprise the conflict exchange, asking Jesus why they were unable to cast out the demon. Jesus' reply does naught to resolve the conflict but instead reiterates it, blaming their failure to heal the boy on their little faith. Thus, in this instance, the conflict exchange is completed, but the conflict is not resolved.

Following Jesus' negative assessment of the disciples' earlier attempt to heal the boy, he then issues his statement of intent to heal (i.e., "bring the boy to me here," v. 17). This imperative, in the second person plural, is not given to the boy's father but rather seems directed towards the disciples. Note, too, that rather than going to the sufferer, as he did in the story of the ruler and attempted to do in the story of the centurion, Jesus in this instance commands that the sufferer be brought to him. Jesus then effects the boy's healing by rebuking the demon,<sup>9</sup> and the account ends with a narrative statement of the immediacy of the healing.

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<sup>9</sup>Although the dative can understand either the boy or the demon as the object of Jesus' rebuke, I invoke the more common translation here.

The sub-structure of this story indicates an economy based on shifting notions of complete and incomplete transactions. This is the only one of the four SOBA accounts where a healing encounter begins prior to the locational exchange – here, when the man makes an earlier healing request of the disciples. It is also the only story in which the disciples play a role in the healing and, alas, they fail miserably. Because of this anterior healing request, the locational exchange that begins the pericope retroactively assumes more significance: this man is continuing, not beginning, his quest for healing for his son. He does not accept the interrupted, aborted transaction brought about by the disciples' inability but kneels before Jesus in an attempt to complete the healing. Although the man's request will eventually be fulfilled, the completion of the healing exchange does not occur until after Jesus has roundly and soundly berated his well-intentioned disciples for what he calls their faithlessness and depravity. When at last Jesus heals the boy, his actions serve to demonstrate that derailed exchanges can be put back on track, that partial transactions can ultimately be fulfilled. And yet, this completeness is achieved only after Jesus identifies what he perceives to be the incompleteness of the disciples and their faith.

As we reach the end of our four SOBA accounts, let us pause for a moment to recall the conclusion of the Canaanite woman's story, where Jesus' limited, exclusive, and insufficient micro-economy seemed to yield to a more inclusive and sufficient one. Here at the end of the father's story, we seem to have reverted to a more troubled, more ambivalent economy. Once again, we find Jesus naming a micro-economy of insufficiency, this time enacted by his disciples. As we leave behind the SOBA accounts, we are left yet again with the uneasy sense that, for Jesus, fullness in one locale necessarily means lack of fullness elsewhere.

### **Local Conclusions and Global Possibilities**

I began this exploration of the Matthean SOBA accounts with the desire to offer a critical reading strategy that might allow for a more complex engagement with the character of Jesus, as



well as a consideration of why such a reading strategy might have important local and global implications. Having enacted the first of these desires in the form of the above analysis, let us pause for a moment to consider both the reading strategy itself and the fruit it produced herein.

The proposed reading strategy involved a close reading of the texts and the activation of the texts' dynamics through the language of their sub-structural economic patterns. One of the chief advantages of any close-reading strategy is its ability to slow down the reader, thereby increasing the likelihood that the reader will notice the details of the literary terrain through which s/he is passing. One of the benefits of using economic language to examine the micro-exchanges within these SOBA stories is that it interrupts our normal but often unrecognized expectations concerning miraculous economies and miraculous outcomes, thereby providing a reading method that seems to both challenge and complement, but certainly not supplant, more traditional readings of these texts.

In terms of learning to read Jesus critically, the proposed reading strategy seems as if it may prove a helpful tool. By analyzing the four stories in terms of their exchanges, rather than primarily in terms of their miraculous outcomes, we identified three types of exchange – locational, healing, and conflict – within the SOBA accounts and noted numerous ways the four texts enacted and deviated from the general pattern.

One observation that emerged from our analysis of the individual texts is how varied the sub-structural economies are in their details. Though the broad economy of each text is one of miraculous exchange, the micro-economies of each story develop differently around exchanges of command and compliance, insider and outsider, sufficiency and insufficiency, life and death, and fullness and incompleteness.

Perhaps the most striking realization in terms of my desire to develop a strategy by which readers can more critically engage the character of Jesus comes with the recognition of how ambivalently Jesus is portrayed across the sweep of these four stories. Yes, Jesus effects a healing

at the end of each story. But at what price? Our sub-structural analyses reveal that in every SOBA account, Jesus excludes someone from his micro-economy, even if only temporarily. In the story of the centurion, the children of the kingdom are expelled; the story of the leader finds the disbelieving mourners and musicians put out of the house; the Canaanite woman – unmanned and quite likely vulnerable – is initially named as someone outside the house of Israel and thereby excluded from Jesus’ healing economy; and in the story of the man, the completeness of Jesus’ healing comes at the expense of the disciples and the named incompleteness of their faith.

On the other hand, we note, too, that Jesus can be highly adaptive and responsive. He “speaks the language” of the centurion’s economy and issues his healing response in the language of that command economy. He assumes or shares the transgressive economy of the ruler without a word of protest. He is swayed and convinced by the Canaanite woman’s arguments. And if on the one hand Jesus does not resolve his habit of simultaneously healing and excluding at the end of our SOBA narratives, on the other hand, his character resists this odd binary and blurs it into an oddly flawed but nonetheless productive capacity as Jesus “tries and tries again” throughout the trajectory of these stories.

In light of these observations, I would suggest that one general conclusion to be drawn from our readings of the SOBA accounts is that there is a pronounced disjuncture between the macroeconomics of the healing stories in general, whose outcome is always a miraculous exchange of infirmity for wholeness, and the microeconomics that form the stuff and substance of each of the SOBA stories. Thus, if we attend only to the outcome of each account, we will miss a critical observation derived from our sub-structural analyses: The internal economies of these healing stories are not perfectly healthy. Instead, they are complex, multi-layered and ambivalent, as is the Jesus who participates in creating these narratives’ sub-structural economies. As such, whatever other roles these healing stories may play, I suggest that they may profitably be read by modern

Christians as cautionary tales that demand a nuanced reading. The SOBA accounts are not stories of unadulterated “good news.” In fact, there are moments when they seem downright problematic and unethical. But alongside these troublesome moments, there is healing, growth and change, which textual shifts we have a better chance of apprehending by reading Jesus critically as a complex, dynamic and undetermined character.

Finally, we consider briefly what significance a critical reading strategy that grapples with Jesus might have in the “real worlds” that exist beyond the confines of this paper. To do so, I return to the local contexts that prompted this work, namely the classrooms where I teach and the local congregation where I worship. In each of these locales, I am unendingly moved by the passion of so many individuals who earnestly seek to enact Jesus faithfully and lovingly in their daily lives. I am also profoundly aware that for many of us who are western Christians, our reenactments of Jesus through prayer, song, liturgy, Bible reading and even social action are grounded in our church’s traditions. While these traditions are deep and rich and good, many of them are also historically steeped in western imperialism, with its posture of universal (i.e., western) Christian triumphalism. Most of the western Christians with whom I am currently in relationship have no wish to replicate a globalization that holds the West, particularly the United States of America, as the center of the universe. We deeply want to recognize our smallness, to name our local and broader contexts, to live responsibly and responsively within these contexts, and to develop sustainable relationships with other peoples who have their own deep and rich and good and ambivalent faith traditions. But how do we interrupt the patterns of our history and begin to build something different?

One small step towards achieving this end is, I think, to be found in more complex readings of the biblical Jesus. Because an unproblematized Christ triumphing over the grave so easily elided in western history into a highly problematic Christian triumphalism, with western Christians

“marching as to war” against spiritual foes and emerging markets all over the globe,<sup>10</sup> it is incumbent upon those of us who desire more sustainable global theological economies not only to name this triumphalist macro-economy but to counter it with an alternative model of exchange. The seeds of such an alternative model may lie precisely within the Bible’s micro-economies, where we encounter, at least in the present stories, not a pristine Christ but seemingly a not-so-perfect Jesus who, in response to requests for healing, nonetheless tries once, twice, thrice, and again. Perhaps by reading more attentively these narrative micro-exchanges, we might come to see Jesus not so much as a supra-national, trans-historical phenomenon but more as a person with his own geography, his own history, his own social contexts. By reading Jesus’ textual embeddedness, we western Christians may be better able to recognize and live out of our own limited boundaries, both individual and communal. Like the centurion, we may then be better able to draw the needed analogies between Jesus’ circumstances and our own: If Jesus is textually delimited by his geography and location, how much more are we? If Jesus sometimes got it wrong, failed to listen and shut down the voices of the oppressed, how much more will we? In short, if we can dare to let Jesus live into the fullness of his textual ambiguities, we might just begin to recognize the fullness – which is to say the limitations – of his humanity, and hence our own. Rather than performing Christ triumphant around the world, we may learn to reenact Jesus the ambiguous within our many contexts. Global pretensions may yield to more nuanced and localized economies, which, with time and in reciprocity with other localized economies, may perhaps, as in our SOBA stories, go on to produce broader macro-economies of healing. And that sounds like a pretty good exchange.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on these interconnections between western Christianity and western imperialism, see the contributions in Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, ed., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007). See also R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2001).

## Appendix A NRSV Translations of SOBA Pericopes<sup>11</sup>

### **Matthew 8:5-13: The Centurion with a Paralyzed Servant**

<sup>5</sup>When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him <sup>6</sup>and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.’ <sup>7</sup>And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’ <sup>8</sup>The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup>For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this,” and the slave does it.’ <sup>10</sup>When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>11</sup>I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>12</sup>while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ <sup>13</sup>And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.

### **Matthew 9:18, 19, 23-25: The Leader Whose Daughter Died**

<sup>18</sup>While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue<sup>12</sup> came in and knelt before him, saying, ‘My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.’ <sup>19</sup>And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples... <sup>23</sup>When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, <sup>24</sup>he said, ‘Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup>But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.

### **Matthew 15:21-28: The Canaanite Woman with a Demon-Possessed Daughter**

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ <sup>24</sup>He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ <sup>26</sup>He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ <sup>27</sup>She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

### **Matthew 17:14-18: The Man with an Epileptic Son**

<sup>14</sup>When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup>and said, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. <sup>16</sup>And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.’ <sup>17</sup>Jesus answered, ‘You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.’ <sup>18</sup>And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

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<sup>11</sup> Quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> In my exploration of this pericope, I worked from the Greek text; hence, I do not use “of the synagogue,” as in the NRSV. Instead, I use “leader” or “ruler” as the translation for ἄρχων.

**Table 2**  
**Overview of Exchanges and Sub-Economies in Matthew 8:5-13**  
**Command and Exclusive Economies: The Story of the Centurion**

<b>Exchange #</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Speaker/ Actor</b>	<b>Delineation</b>	<b>Narration in Brief</b>	<b>Implied Economies and Notes on Exchanges</b>
1	Locational	Jesus	Jesus' movement	Jesus enters Capernaum	
		SOBA	SOBA's movement	Centurion approaches, begging	
2	Healing Request	SOBA	Titular address Statement of malady Statement of suffering Request	Lord Servant is bedridden & paralyzed Suffers terribly [none]	Only account without a direct or indirect healing request. Still, Jesus responds immediately to the centurion's – likely a gentile – request for healing.
	Healing Response	Jesus	Statement of intent	I will come and heal him.	
3	Conflict	SOBA	Titular address Interruption of proposed exchange Explanation for interruption	Lord I am not worthy  I give a command and it is done; so it is for you as well.	Centurion interrupts proposed locational economy; proposes alternate, command economy. Jesus does not resist alternate command economy but accepts it and approves centurion.
	Conflict Resolution	Jesus	Statement of approval	I haven't found anyone else in Israel with such great faith.	
4	Conflict	Jesus	Proposal of alternate, subverting economy	Many outsiders will become insiders; many insiders will become outsiders.	Proposed economy is subversive but also exclusive: not everyone is allowed in, and insiders may become outsiders.
2'	Healing Response, Cont.	Jesus	Healing command Time of healing	Go, may it be as you believe. Servant healed in that hour.	Jesus heals by adopting the language of the centurion's command economy: Go.

**Table 3**  
**Overview of Exchanges and Sub-Economies in Matthew 9:18, 19, 23-25**  
**A Transgressive Economy: The Story of the Leader Whose Daughter Died**

<b>Exchange #</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Speaker/ Actor</b>	<b>Delineation</b>	<b>Narration in Brief</b>	<b>Implied Economies and Notes on Exchanges</b>
1	Locational		Jesus' movement	[none]	Only SOBA story begun without Jesus' movement onto the scene; incomplete pattern of locational exchange.
		SOBA	SOBA's movement	Ruler comes to Jesus and falls at his feet	
2	Healing Request	SOBA	Titular address Statement of malady Request	[none] My daughter just died Come and lay your hand on her and she will live	Only story where SOBA uses no titular address. Leader assumes a transgressive economy; Jesus does not argue with or deny the assumption. Is Jesus' movement here the missing locational exchange from #1?
	Healing Response	Jesus	Action of intent	Gets up and follows with disciples	
3	Conflict	Jesus	Statement of malady	Go away; she's only sleeping	Jesus assumes transgressive economy; crowd rejects it.
		Crowd	Rejection of statement	Ridicules him and is put outside	
2'	Healing Response, Cont.	Jesus	Healing action Healing response Time of healing	Grasps her hand The girl was raised [none]	Only story without specified time of healing.

**Table 4**  
**Overview of Exchanges and Sub-Economies in Matthew 15:21-28**  
**An Inclusive and Sufficient Economy: The Story of the Canaanite Woman**

<b>Exchange #</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Speaker/ Actor</b>	<b>Delineation</b>	<b>Narration in Brief</b>	<b>Implied Economies and Notes on Exchanges</b>
1	Locational	Jesus SOBA	Jesus' movement SOBA's movement	Jesus withdraws to Tyre & Sidon Woman from there comes out, crying	Location of Jesus and woman not fully clear – boundaries are blurred.
2	Healing Request	SOBA	Request Titular address	Have mercy on me Lord, son of David	Most elaborate titular designation of 4 SOBA stories. Jesus' silence interrupts and aborts the requested exchange.
	Healing Response	Jesus	Statement or action of intent	[none]	
3	Conflict	Disciples	Request for her dismissal Explanation of request	Send her away. She is crying out after us.	Not clear if disciples want her sent away with or without healing. Jesus articulates a closed and limited economy, where there is enough only for the house of Israel; others excluded.
		Jesus	Denial of request and explanation	I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.	
2'	Healing Request, Cont.	SOBA	Titular address Request	Lord Help me.	Jesus responds directly to woman with reiteration of closed economy.
	Healing Response Cont., & Conflict	Jesus	Statement or action of intent Denial of request and explanation	[none] It is not good to throw the children's bread to the dogs.	
4	Conflict	SOBA	Assent Titular address Proposal of alternate viewpoint	Yes Lord But the dogs eat the crumbs from masters' table	Woman accepts Jesus' limited economy but proposes a more inclusive lens through which to view it as an economy where there is at least some for everyone. Jesus accepts her economy.
	Conflict Resolution	Jesus	Address Statement of approval	O woman Great is your faith	
2''	Healing Response, Cont.	Jesus	Healing speech Time of healing	Let it be for you as you wish. Daughter healed from that hour.	



**Table 5**  
**Overview of Exchanges and Sub-Economies in Matthew 17:14-18**  
**(In)Complete Economies: The Story of the Man with the Epileptic Son**

<b>Exchange #</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Speaker/ Actor</b>	<b>Delineation</b>	<b>Narration in Brief</b>	<b>Implied Economies and Notes on Exchanges</b>
1	Locational	Jesus SOBA	Jesus' movement SOBA's movement	Jesus comes down from mountain A man comes to Jesus and falls on knees	First healing after transfiguration
2	Healing	SOBA	Titular Address Request Statement of Malady Statement of Suffering Explanation of Malady	Lord Have mercy on my son He is an epileptic He suffers terribly Falls into the fire and water	
3	Anterior Healing Request	SOBA	Request for healing	I brought him to your disciples	Interrupted or incomplete economy: father attempts the exchange, but disciples are unable to fulfill request and complete the transaction.
	Anterior Response	Disciples	Attempted healing action	They could not heal him	
4	Conflict	Jesus	Address Statements of disapproval	O faithless and depraved generation How long must I be with you and endure you?	Jesus responds negatively and forcefully, seemingly in response to disciples' inability to complete anterior healing request (cf. v. 20).
2'	Healing Response	Jesus	Statement of intent Healing speech Healing response Time of healing	Bring the boy to me here Rebukes him/it Demon comes out Boy healed from that hour	Exchange requested by father but interrupted by disciples' inability is completed here.