THE CENTURION

When he came into Capernaum, a centurion came to him, urgently imploring him and saying, "Lord, my son lies crippled in bed at home and suffering terribly." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only speak a word and my son will be healed. For I too am a man with authority, having under me soldiers. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who were following him: "I tell you truly, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the kingdom's own children will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and the grinding of teeth." And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go, it will be to you as you have believed." And {his} son was healed in that very hour.
Matthew 8:5-13

The first miraculous deed Jesus performed after the Sermon on the Mount was accomplished through an outcast leper. From a Jewish perspective, this miraculous deed is much the same.

The first person Jesus healed was a leper, the archetype of the outsider, the person barred from participation in Israel's worship and social life. The second person Jesus encounters in Matthew's series was provisionally barred from Israel's <u>inner life</u>: he was a Gentile (more probably a Syrian than a Roman). Lepers could not enter Jerusalem at all. Gentiles could, but they could go no further into the temple than the outermost court of the Gentiles. Male Gentiles were considered unclean unless they became proselytes, were circumcised, and ritually washed. Only a leper was more unclean than a Gentile.
Dale Brunner - Matthew, page 378

Note that the healing of the leper was done with a direct touch whereas this healing is done from a distance through a word from Jesus.

What is even more important to notice is that this healing passage becomes a teaching tool. And the teaching here is the first direct statement of the salvation-historical rejection of the Jews.

And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.
Matthew 3:9

This passage finds similarities – although not exact – in Luke and John.

In Luke, the centurion petitions on behalf of his servant rather than his son.

Luke also tells us that the servant is not only suffering but about to die.

The centurion is the Gospel of Luke never has contact with Jesus personally but sends *"elders of the Jews"* to Jesus.

These elders give a positive credentialed report that the centurion is a *"God-fearing man"* who loves the Jews and had built a synagogue for them,

Most translations render the word παῖς *(pah-eece)* as servant, but the word can also mean a child, even an infant. Thus, given the centurion's desperation, we will assume that it is his male child whom he petitions for.

Matthew also, intentionally omits the centurion's favor with the Jews. This even more so emphasizes the grace Jesus displays toward the Gentile.

The true effect of what Matthew is doing here is teaching the acceptance of the Gentiles while placing a judgment oracle against unbelieving Israel.

Matthew also emphasizes that the son was healed that very hour whereas Luke mentions the knowledge of the healing only when the elders return to the centurion's home. By doing this, Matthew stresses the immediacy of the remote healing.

John's Gospel also contains a story similar to this account and it too is set in Capernaum. It concerns a *"royal official"* whose young son was sick and about to die. This official, unlike Matthew and Luke pleads for Jesus to come with him to his house to heal his son. Jesus does not go with the official but initiates the healing from a distance. The next day, the official, returning to his home with an entourage finds that his son was healed at the exact hour Jesus said.

Given that these accounts are similar, it would seem that we have variations by each writer which may be traced back to the same story.

> *When he came into Capernaum, a centurion came to him, urgently imploring him and saying, "Lord, my son lies crippled in bed at home and suffering terribly."*
> *Matthew 8:5-6*

Capernaum was the center of Jesus and his Galilean ministry.

> *While in Galilee, he moved from Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.*
> *Matthew 4:13*

The town was located near the border of a trade route thus drawing a contingent of Roman soldiers.

A centurion was an official in charge of a company of troops numbering one hundred.

Most likely, the centurion did not share the same high view of Jesus as Matthew's reading community, but his designation of Jesus as *"Κύριε -Lord"* (like the leper), most likely meant more than a mere *"sir."*

He must have at the least regarded Jesus as a person endowed by God with authority, possibly sovereignty over the physical realm.

Again, we will presume that the person in question is the centurion's young male child which is why the normal word for son *υἱός (huios)* is not used here. When we link this story with the similar account in the Gospel of John, the connection to the official's *son* seems likely.

Also, as previously mentioned, the deep concern by the centurion more naturally fits the case for his son which finds a parallel in a similar account in Matthew 15 where the subject of a Canaanite's mother's plea is for her daughter.

Perhaps another reason for Matthew to omit the centurion's friendly disposition with the Jews is so that we gain no expectation that such a man would approach much less have any confidence in Jesus as a Jew.

Another note of interest could be that the reason the centurion does not ask Jesus to come to his house despite his confidence, is that he understands that as a Jew, Jesus must not enter the home of a Gentile.

And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him."
Matthew 8:7

The unusual syntax of this verse in Greek has caused the debate that Jesus responded with a question: *"Shall I come and heal him?"* The reason this is worth looking into is that as a question it reveals the surprise Jesus had that a Gentile approached him for healing when at this point, Gentiles were not yet in his chronological sights.

This places us back at the point of a Gentile asking a Jew to come to his house, a matter dealt with in Acts.

He said to them, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, yet God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean. Therefore when you sent for me I came without any objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"
Acts 10:28-29

Luke's account of this encounter has Jesus going to the centurion's house without hesitation, and regardless, Matthew also shows the willingness of Jesus to go immediately. This also fits well with Matthew's narrative as Jesus responded to the leper with the same immediacy.

And a leper approached, and bowed low before him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him

saying, "I am willing. Be clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.
Matthew 8:2-3

Note the action takes place before the response is given.

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only speak a word and my son will be healed.
Matthew 8:8

Given what we've already discussed, the unworthiness of the centurion should not be seen as personal but rather as a Gentile who understands and is sensitive to the customs of Jews which we have already seen, prohibited association with Gentiles.

One who buys a field in Syrai next to the Land of Israel, if he can enter it in purity, it is pure and it is obligated in tithes and in {in the laws of} the Sabbatical year.
Mishna Oholot 18:7

What else can be seen here is the centurions' confidence that just a word from Jesus, just his declaration of speech, even at distance, will be sufficient for the healing to take place.

The foundation for this confidence, as we shall see, lies in the centurion's knowledge of the authority of Jesus.

For I too am a man with authority, having under me soldiers. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."
Matthew 8:9

There are some manuscripts that pose the centurion's phrase of *"For I too am a man <u>under</u> authority,"* with the words *"For I too am a man <u>with</u> authority."* (See Old Syriac version).

The passage as we read it makes good sense. The centurion is *"under authority"* meaning he has been granted authority by those over him. They in turn have granted him to hold and exercise authority over others.

The point being made is that the centurion has absolute authority over servants and troops, but he recognizes that Jesus has absolute authority *as one under the authority of God*, over maladies, illnesses, and ailments that besiege humanity.

As the orders of the centurion are obeyed, so then must the orders of Jesus be obeyed. This view implies his belief in the messianic authority and status of Jesus.

When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who were following him: "I tell you truly, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."
Matthew 8:11

Jesus is astonished at the centurion's faith and publicly acknowledges this amazement. This story finds its parallel in Matthew 15 where another Gentile exercises such faith.

> *"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, your faith is great! Let what you want be done for you." And her daughter was healed from that hour.*
> *Matthew 15:27-28*

It would seem that the faith of the centurion – which is never stated verbally by the man himself – exceeds what Jesus has encountered thus far on his mission.

> *The effect of this statement is not only a criticism of the slowness of Israel to believe, a motif that will have increasing prominence as the Gospel proceeds, but also, and more importantly, to call attention to the genuine possibility of Gentile faith, and hence, participation in the kingdom.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 205*

> *For it is like a man going on a journey who summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.*
> *Matthew 24:14*

> *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.*
> *Matthew 25:14*

> *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*
> *Matthew 28:19*

Matthew will also continue to build on this word *"faith"* throughout the remainder of his Gospel.

> *I tell you that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the kingdom's own children will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and the grinding of teeth."*
> *Matthew 8:11-12*

This is the main point of the passage and Matthew places it here to further draw significance to the faith of the centurion.

In a different context, Luke also uses verbiage similar to Matthew but the point is the same: eschatological judgment.

> *In that place there will weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west and from north and*

south, and recline at the table in the kingdom of God.
Luke 13:28-29

Matthew begins with the statement about *"many"* who will come from east and west and partake at the table in the Kingdom of God. This is the marriage supper of the Lamb and the great celebration of his final victory which was anticipated in both the Old and New Testaments.

The LORD who commanded armies will hold a banquet for all the nations on this mountain. At this banquet there will be plenty of meat and aged wine – tneder meat and choicest wine.
Isaiah 25:6

But while they had gone to buy it, the bridegroom arrived, and those who were ready went inside with him to the wedding banquet. Then the door was shut.
Matthew 25:10

Then the angel said to me, "Write the following: Blessed are those who are invited to the banquet at the wedding celebration of the Lamb!"
Revelation 19:9

When one of those at the meal with Jesus hear this, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will feast in the kingdom of God!" But Jesus said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many guests.
Luke 14:15-16

In the future, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will prepare a feast for the righteous on the day that He extends [sheyigmol] His mercy to the descendants of Isaac. After they eat and drink, the celebrants will give Abraham our father a cup of blessing to recite the blessing, as he is the first of our forefathers.
Pesahchim 119b

Until this point, such a banquet was thought to be a strictly Jewish affair with the Gentiles at best receiving the overflow from the blessings to the Jews. The Gentiles would indeed make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the end, but mainly as witnesses of God's blessing of Israel, not as direct participants in it.
Hagner – Matthew, page 205

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the

Lord from Jerusalem."
Isaiah 2:2-3

The reference of many coming from the east and west was originally thought to be the return of the exiled Jews back to Israel.

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
Psalm 107:2-3

Fear not, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
Isaiah 43:5

Lo, your sons approach, whom you sent away, they come gathered together from the east to the west by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the glory of God.'"
Baruch 4:37

But now with the coming of the Messiah, that exclusion is turned on its head in an apparent reversal of salvation-history. It is the Gentiles who are being called from the ends of the earth. The centurion represents the beginning of a stream of Gentiles who will come from east and west to join the eschatological banquet, while – and consider the offense of this unparalleled teaching – the Jews, "the sons of the kingdom," will themselves (in large part, i.e., who reject the Messiah) be rejected, although of course, this does not apply to the Old Testament saints.
Hagner – Matthew, page 206

"Sons of the kingdom" means those who belong to the Kingdom, those who are the sons of the covenant. These are the people who always gave allegiance to Yahweh and the promises that came with him. The *True sons of the Kingdom"* are those who respond to the proclamation of Jesus who fulfills the promises of Yahweh.

The field is the world and the good seed are the people of the kingdom.
Matthew 13:38

"Will be thrown into outer darkness." – is a strong theological expression which refers to the greatest possible contrast to the great feast mentioned in the verses above.

The second order—because they see the panic in which the souls of the wicked wander and the punishment that awaits them.
2 Esdras 7:93

Therefore their inheritance is the grave, and darkness, and destruction, and they will be found in the day of mercy for the righteous. But the faithful ones of the LORD will inherit life in joy.
Psalm of Solomon 14:9-10

Weeping and gnashing of teeth are a Matthew favorite and express the torment of those who face eschatological judgment.

Some see the phrase as portraying fear for their situation and rage against God while others see it as an expression of anguish and self-reproach.

And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go, it will be to you as you have believed." And {his} son was healed in that very hour.
Matthew 8:13

We now see Jesus returning to the request of the centurion where he relays a positive outcome to his plea. As already stated, this healing occurs at a distance.

Some scholars note that such healings at a distance only happened to Gentiles.

Matthew clearly makes a connection between faith and healing in his Gospel and the centurion's faith is largely the start of this focus.

"At that very hour" is an impact statement which tells us that it was the power of Jesus that was responsible for the healing. John's Gospel relays this same point to us in a parallel passage.

Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants[a] met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour[b] the fever left him." The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his household.
John 4: 50-53

The second miracle performed by Jesus in this section is indeed remarkable in its own right: the healing of a terribly ill child at a distance and by the speaking of a word. The story itself stresses the sovereign authority and uniqueness of Jesus, though Matthew draws no special attention to the Christological significance of the story. Indeed, he focuses on the faith of the Gentile centurion, faith that put Israel to shame. The kingdom brought by Jesus is by its nature undeniably

universal in scope. the centurion's faith is the first fruit of a ministry that will be designed to "make disciples of all nations." What is anticipated here and commanded at the end of the Gospel finds its fruition in the course of the events narrated by the Acts of the Apostles.
Hagner – Matthew, page 206