

The Rhetoric of Matthean "Small Faith"

Abstract

Matthew uses ὀλιγόπιστος to critique inadequate faith from the disciples, adapting already linked Markan pericopes to create a set with a distinct rhetorical function. For the Gospel audience, these function together to call people to the sort of wholehearted trust exemplified in the first use of the term (6,25–34), while developing this ideal in a christological direction. Linguistic studies on the role of the vocative highlight how ὀλιγόπιστος is used to effect this goal, as it serves to recharacterize the disciples, drawing attention to the narrative frame, and emphasising the imperative force of Jesus' rhetorical questions.

Matthäus verwendet ὀλιγόπιστος, um den unzureichenden Glauben der Jünger zu kritisieren, und passt bereits verknüpfte Markan-Perikope an, um eine Menge mit einer bestimmten rhetorischen Funktion zu erstellen. Für das Publikum des Evangeliums dienen diese zusammen dazu, die Menschen zu einer Art vollem Vertrauen aufzurufen, das in der ersten Verwendung des Begriffs (6,25–34) veranschaulicht wird, während dieses Ideal in eine christologische Richtung entwickelt wird. Sprachwissenschaftliche Studien zur Rolle des Vokativs zeigen, wie ὀλιγόπιστος verwendet wird, um dieses Ziel zu erreichen, da es dazu dient, die Jünger neu zu charakterisieren, die Aufmerksamkeit auf den narrativen Rahmen zu lenken und die zwingende Kraft der rhetorischen Fragen Jesu hervorzuheben.

Key words: Matthew; faith; rhetoric; vocative

1. Introduction

Faith is central to Christian conceptions of how one ought to respond to Jesus, and the documents of the New Testament seek to evoke such faith. Not only do they seek to evoke faith in Jesus, but they also work towards generating a particular quality of faith in their audiences. To investigate the rhetoric of faith is to examine the ways in which

Gospel texts are shaped to influence their audience towards a certain kind of faith.¹ As narratives, the Gospels do not simply list the features of an ideal faith response or what makes some forms of faith inadequate. Rather the Gospels use narrative to depict responses, showing faith enacted rather than explained. While narrative depictions may make it harder to be precise on all details of what constitutes the intended response in any particular Gospel, an analysis of such depictions enables us to trace out at least some of the features of the ideal response that a given Gospel seeks to evoke in its audience.

One of the significant ways the Gospel narratives seek to evoke a certain kind of faith is through praising some responses and critiquing others. In Matthew, certain responses are critiqued with the use of the adjective *ὀλιγόπιστος*. There are four instances of *ὀλιγόπιστος* in Matthew (6,30; 8,26; 14,31; 16,8), along with one use of the cognate noun *ὀλιγοπιστία* (17,20). This article analyses the Matthean use of *ὀλιγόπιστος*, identifying the meaning of the term in Matthew but also advancing the argument that all the Matthean uses form a connected set that together have a rhetorical function with regard to the Gospel audience.

In investigating the rhetoric of faith in Matthew, what follows is a literary approach, in that it will focus on the form and effect of the text as we have it. However, this is set within the framework of assuming a real author whose aim is at least partially uncoverable in the text, in as far as a real author lies behind the ideal author within the

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¹ See for example Christopher Seglenieks, "Untrustworthy Believers. The Rhetorical Strategy of the Johannine Language of Commitment and Belief," *NovT* 61, no. 1 (2019).

text.² Equally, it is assumed that there is a real audience that the author seeks to persuade towards the ideal response of faith. Precision with regard to the identity of this audience is not possible, so we are limited to envisioning a later first century Christian audience, which is likely to be predominantly Jewish.³ Alongside the literary considerations, the resources of linguistics will be used to help clarify the way in which language is being used with regard to the audience. The contextual study by Teresa Morgan is also foundational, and in light of the evidence she provides that *πιστίς* was primarily relational in the Graeco-Roman world, it will be assumed similarly with *ὀλιγόπιστος* that a sense of relational trust is primary unless evidence in the context suggests otherwise.⁴

² The identity of the real author will not be addressed here, the point is rather that it is plausible to attribute persuasive intent to an author via the text.

³ Dating of Matthew ranges from 50's to 90's AD, with the majority of critical scholars favouring a later date. Antioch is commonly suggested as a possible location, although many places in Palestine are possible. Debate of authorship is unresolved, revolving around whether or not one accepts the traditions of the early church. On these topics, France has one of the most comprehensive treatments. R. T. France, *Matthew. Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), 50–122. See also Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 3–5; Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 8–15; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1.7–57, 127–147.

⁴ Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See similarly Anna Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte im Frühchristentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 444–445. Matthias Konradt argues the relational idea is one of the key contexts for the language of faith in Matthew, along with the power of faith and the faith of those seeking healing, with trust as a defining feature of each of these contexts. Matthias Konradt, “Die Rede vom Glauben in Heilungsgeschichten und die Messianität Jesu im Matthäusevangelium,” in *Glaube: Das Verständnis des Glaubens im frühen Christentum und in seiner jüdischen und hellenistisch-römischen Umwelt* (eds. J. Frey, et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 424–425. The relative significance of trust over propositional belief argued by Morgan has been challenged, for example by Francis Watson and Mark A. Seifrid, in “Quaestiones disputatae: Roman Faith and Christian Faith,” *NTS* 64 (2018), 243–261. Scholarly attention to faith in Matthew has been limited, as noted by

1.1. Background to ὀλιγόπιστος

There is no evidence for the use of ὀλιγόπιστος prior to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is plausible that the term has Jewish origins, as similar expressions are found in Rabbinic sources.⁵ This would align with the Jewish character of Matthew's Gospel, and he may be drawing on a concept that was familiar to his audience. However, as the Rabbinic texts are dated later than the Gospels, we cannot place interpretative weight upon these parallels, and the sense of ὀλιγόπιστος must be determined from use within the Gospels.⁶ Whilst it is possible that the author of the Gospel coined the term, it is also plausible that the Gospels may derive the term from other oral or written sources within the early Christian context. As the first instance in Matthew appears in the parallel Lukan passage, some scholars suggest the term derives from Q.⁷ However, the

Konradt, "Die Rede vom Glauben," 423. Other recent work exploring the meaning of πιστίς includes Jeanette H. Pifer, *Faith as Participation: An Exegetical Study of Some Key Pauline Texts* (WUNT II/486; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Matthew W. Bates, "The External-Relational Shift in Faith (Pistis) in New Testament Research: Romans 1 as Gospel-Allegiance Test Case," *CBR* 18, no. 2 (2020); Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Christopher Seglenieks, *Johannine Belief and Graeco-Roman Devotion* (WUNT II/528; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

⁵ The rabbinic parallels are similar to Matt 6,30 reflecting anxiety over food, often in relation to the Exodus narrative. See Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch. Book I: Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Munich: Beck, 1922), 438–439. Cf. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 379–381; Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (EKK; 4 vols.; Zürich: Benziger, 2002), 1.480; Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing. A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 248; Morgan, *Roman* (see n. 4), 366. Contra Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1981–1985), 979.

⁶ On the validity of cautious use of Rabbinic material for understanding Matthew, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 6–7.

⁷ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 380; Konradt, "Rede," (see n. 4), 425; Francois Bovon, *Luke* (Hermeneia; trans. J. Crouch; 3 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002–2013), 2.218; Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. J. B. Robinson; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68; Gerhard Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel in den synoptischen Evangelien," *ZTK* 72, no. 3 (1975), 282.

particular way in which Luke uses the term is also compatible with Luke deriving the term from Matthew.⁸ As only the use in Matt 6,30/Luke 12,28 potentially comes from Q material, and in each Gospel *ὀλιγόπιστος* is used in a distinctive way that aligns with broader purposes of each of the Gospels, the following argument is not significantly influenced by the precise origins of the term.

2. Ὀλιγόπιστος in Matthew

As part of the analysis of *ὀλιγόπιστος* in Matthew, it is argued that all the instances of *ὀλιγόπιστος* in Matthew form part of a deliberately connected set. In order to make the case, the first step will be to consider the connections between the Markan passages that Matthew has repurposed. This will be followed by an investigation of each of the Matthean passages to establish both how the connections seen in the underlying Markan passages are reinforced, along with the implications of *ὀλιγόπιστος* in each case. This will enable an argument to be made for the rhetorical function of this set of passages for the Gospel audience.

2.1. The Markan basis for the pattern

In Matthew, the second through fourth instances of *ὀλιγόπιστος* all appear in Markan passages to which Matthew has added the language of *ὀλιγόπιστος*.⁹ We will consider

⁸ Luke juxtaposes the critique of 'little-faithed' worry about material things with a call to generosity based upon trust in God's provision in Luke 12,32–34, which is not paralleled in Matthew's account.

⁹ Nürnberger notes the Matthean insertion of the term into Markan passages and suggests that the passages are further linked through transfers of divine predicates to the figure of Jesus. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 526. However, while stilling the storm may have divine overtones, and the walking on water is presented with elements of a theophany, there is nothing notably divine in Mark 8,14–21/Matt 16,5–12. It is possible that the participle *γινούς* indicates divine knowledge (Mark 8,17/Matt 16,8). However, nothing requires that it be supernatural, nor is any attention drawn to it, contra Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 504.

later the implications of the changes in each particular instance, but initially we can observe that the three Markan passages are already connected to each other.¹⁰ Firstly, they each occur on a boat on the sea of Galilee. While the action of Mark has frequently occurred beside the sea, 4,35–41 is the first time that Jesus and the disciples cross over the sea to the other side (εἰς τὸ πέραν 4,35; cf. 6,45; 8,14).¹¹ While there are repeated crossings in the following chapters, the events of 6,45–52 and 8,13–21 are the only subsequent times where events take place during the crossing.

There are further links between the passages. The first two of these stories are connected by the same temporal setting, with each taking place ὁψίας γενομένης (4,35; 6,47). The weather is threatening in each case, with Jesus resolving matters when ἐκόπασεν ὁ ἄνεμος (4,39; 6,51). The reaction of the disciples is one of fear (4,40–41; 6,50).¹² Similarly, the second and third stories are connected through repeated language. The lack of understanding on behalf of the disciples is noted in each case (συνίημι 6,52; 8,17.21). More strikingly, the unusual statement that the disciples' hearts

¹⁰ Paul Achtemeier has argued that Mark 4–8 reflects two parallel catenae beginning with a sea miracle and concluding with a feeding miracle. Such an intentional structuring suggests many of the stories may be deliberately connected, while Matthew has appropriated those that focus upon the disciples and their exercise of faith. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *JBL* 89, no. 3 (1970); "The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae," *JBL* 91, no. 2 (1972). Robert Guelich puts these three passages together as depicting "the disciples' response to Jesus in the time of their own need." Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26* (WBC 34A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 425.

¹¹ As Christopher Marshall notes, the uses of μαθητής in Mark are ambiguous and thus it may be more than just the 12 involved in these scenes. However, the setting on a boat necessarily restricts the size of the audience, and so it should not be understood as a wider crowd that may include the merely curious. Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (SNTSMS 62; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153.

¹² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 269.

had been hardened appears in both passages (6,52; 8,17).¹³ Thus, these three stories are connected within their Markan context.

2.2. Matthew 6,30

Prior to using the three Markan passages, Matthew makes a first use of ὀλιγόπιστος in the Sermon on the Mount, within a section where Jesus teaches against worry (μεριμνάω, Matt 6,25–34).¹⁴ He presents anxiety over material needs such as food, drink, and clothing as at odds with the provision of God, which is exemplified in his care for non-human elements of creation. In this context, Jesus says εἰ δὲ τὸν χόρτον τοῦ ἀγροῦ σήμερον ὄντα καὶ αὔριον εἰς κλίβανον βαλλόμενον ὁ θεὸς οὕτως ἀμφιέννυσιν, οὐ πολλῷ μᾶλλον ὑμᾶς, ὀλιγόπιστοι; (6,30). The audience are challenged for being ‘little faithed’ for participating in such worry, and thus demonstrating a lack of trust in God’s provision.¹⁵ The issue is not their fundamental attitude towards God, or towards Jesus, as they have followed Jesus, at least to the extent of coming out to hear him teach. The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is primarily directed at insiders, teaching how to live in light of God’s kingdom.¹⁶ The audience are not cast as opponents of Jesus, nor are they condemned,

¹³ France suggests that the hardening of hearts is equivalent to a lack of understanding, and links both these cases to Isa 6,9–10. France, *Mark* (see n. 12), 273. However, OT use of ‘hardened hearts’ implies wilful resistance to God, and thus entails harsher criticism than merely not understanding. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SP 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 252.

¹⁴ μεριμνάω is only used occasionally in the Gospels outside this passage and the Lukan parallel. It is used to reflect anxious care, such as Martha’s preoccupation with societal obligations of hosting guests (Luke 10,41) and the instruction not to worry about what to say if taken before the authorities (Matt 10,19; Luke 12,11). Rudolf Bultmann, μεριμνάω κτλ. *TDNT* 4.589–593. Nürnberger argues for a connection with μερίζω and thus the term conveying the sense of internal dissonance. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 446.

¹⁵ As Nürnberger notes, the admonition is placed centrally within the structure of this unit, indicating its importance. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 444; cf. Konradt, “Rede,” (see n. 4), 425.

¹⁶ Pennington, *Sermon* (see n. 5), 114.

and so to be 'little faithed' is not about accepting or rejecting Jesus; it is a deficiency of faith rather than an absence.¹⁷ Neither is the issue one of doctrine in a christological sense. Jesus does not refer people to any form of special revelation, but instead points to the way creation witnesses to the provision of God. The evidence is to help evoke trust, not teach something otherwise unknown.

Matthew does not merely critique this attitude but offers a solution as well. The attitude of *μεριμνάω* characterises the nations, who seek after their material needs (*ἐπιζητέω*) (6,32). By contrast, Jesus' followers are to replace such seeking after material needs with seeking (*ζητέω*) the kingdom (6,33).¹⁸ By providing a solution to his audience, we see that Matthew's rhetoric here is not condemnatory, but seeking to encourage the right attitude, to enable his audience to move from their 'small faith' to a greater trust in God's provision.¹⁹ We see, therefore, something of a purpose towards strengthening the faith of his audience.

By placing this teaching in the setting of Jesus addressing a large crowd, the impression is of a broadly applicable standard of faith. This is the only use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* towards a large crowd, with the subsequent uses limited in their audience to those who would fit in a boat. Thus, while *ὀλιγόπιστος* is vocative, it is less personally confronting

¹⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 252; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 264; David L. Turner, *Matthew* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 200; Davies and Allison, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 1.656.

¹⁸ While the originality of *τοῦ θεοῦ* is uncertain, even if omitted the sense is surely implied. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 15–16. On replacing one seeking for another, see Osborne, *Matthew* (see n.17), 253; Pennington, *Sermon* (see n. 5), 249.

¹⁹ Turner, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 200.

here than it may be in what follows. Effectively, for the Gospel audience we have a general standard of trust which they are encouraged to aim for.

The connection between this passage and the set of Markan stories is established first and foremost through the repeated use of *ὀλιγόπιστος*. If, as is plausible, the Matthean audience were familiar with the Markan versions of these stories, the change in language would have been notable. Such changes give added prominence to the term, which would increase the degree to which such an audience would link subsequent uses back to the initial case. More than merely repeating a lexeme, however, in each instance the adjective is used as a substantive vocative. Thus the continuity of forms would function to link the stories together for the audience. The connection is strengthened as in each of the three Markan stories, Matthew not only uses *ὀλιγόπιστος*, but pairs it with a rhetorical question. Each of the stories reflects a failure amongst the disciples to trust as was depicted in 6,25–34. These subsequent uses of *ὀλιγόπιστος* are intended to recall this initial use, linking back to the general standard of trust.²⁰

2.3. Matthew 8,26

Matthew's second use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* comes in the calming of the storm. The disciples are in their boat with a sleeping Jesus when they are battered by a storm. Upon being woken, in the Matthean version Jesus critiques his disciples for their 'small-faith' (8,26). There are several notable differences to the previous use. The audience is much more limited, with the boat precluding the presence of the larger crowd, and possibly limiting

²⁰ Further thematic links in Matthew are adduced by Carlos Olivares, although these are predominantly reflected in the connections already present between the Markan passages as observed above. Carlos Olivares, "The Term *ὀλιγόπιστος* (Little Faith) in Matthew's Gospel: Narrative and Thematic Connections," *Colloquium* 47, no. 2 (2015), 275–286.

the audience to the Twelve, although that is not made explicit. In addition, the audience is more clearly followers of Jesus, as it is those who are travelling with him and thus who have made some commitment to follow, an embodied acceptance of Jesus' claims.²¹ There is also a shift in how ὀλιγόπιστος is characterised. Where 6,30 focused on anxiety over future material provision it is now fear provoked by imminent physical danger.²² The disciples are described as δειλοί as well as ὀλιγόπιστοι.²³ Yet this difference ought not be overplayed, as both worry and fear involve an apprehensive attitude to the future rather than trust in God.

The disciples' response to their dire circumstances is to wake Jesus with the exclamation Κύριε, σῶσον, ἀπολλύμεθα (8,25). There are similarities between this statement and the words of those who seek healing from Jesus. The address Κύριε implies respect if not authority, and parallels that of two supplicants earlier in the chapter (8,2.8). The call to save similarly echoes the desire of those coming for healing and conveys some sense of trust or belief that Jesus could in fact save them. In this

²¹ In each instance ὀλιγόπιστος is applied to those who are already following Jesus in some fashion, and they are not cast as opponents. There is a distinction between the language of ὀλιγόπιστος applied to the disciples, and ἄπιστος applied to the people. Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7), 282–283. Thus, while their faith falls short, it appears that we are to read these characters as true followers who temporarily fail. Nijay K. Gupta, "The Spirituality of Faith in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Matthew and Mark across Perspectives* (eds. K. Bendoraitis, et al.; London: T&T Clark, 2016), 119. Nürnberger observes that this scene follows challenging teaching in 8,18–22 and for the disciples, continuing to follow Jesus amounts to a vote of trust. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 467, cf. Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7) 283. Matthew never uses other πίστις language to denote a positive response to Jesus that is also flawed. All other uses of faith language are either positive and do not draw attention to any failings, or are outright negative, using either the πιστεύω with οὐ/μή or the negated forms ἄπιστος/ἀπιστία.

²² Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 469. Andries van Aarde argues that the primary feature of ὀλιγόπιστος is that fear has not been conquered. Andries G. van Aarde, "Little Faith: A Pragmatic-Linguistic Perspective on Matthew's Portrayal of Jesus' Disciples," *In die Skriflig* 49, no. 1 (2015), 3.

²³ As Morris notes, this is more than slight nervousness. Morris, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 206.

situation, fear has overwhelmed trust, and the actions of the disciples are driven by that fear rather than acting out of trust.

Jesus in his response suggests they ought not be afraid, saying *Τί δειλοί ἐστε;* (8,26). There is no explicit answer given as to why they ought not be afraid, but the most obvious solution is the presence of Jesus, and by implication his identity. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, and he is present in the boat, then the boat will not sink, and they will not all perish. If this is the chosen one through whom God is acting, God's plans cannot be thwarted by something as trivial as a storm, mere wind and waves. The disciples ought to have realised this, and therefore their fear represents in part a failure to grasp Jesus' identity and therefore to trust in his protective presence with them. The importance of Jesus' identity and the disciples' failure to grasp it is reflected in their question *Ποταπός ἐστιν οὗτος;* (Matt 8,27).²⁴ The implication is that they have not yet grasped Jesus' identity, and therefore why the wind and waves obey him. The irony of their failure to understand is highlighted by the scene that immediately follows, where a demon is able to identify Jesus as the Son of God (8,29). The attention of the audience is drawn to the disciples' shortcoming as Jesus responds to their failure before dealing with the storm. In contrast to the Markan version of this story, it is the interaction between Jesus and his disciples which is at the centre.²⁵ Matthew seeks to emphasise their need for greater faith as a greater threat than the storm. Thus where Mark focuses primarily on the miracle as demonstration of Jesus' identity, Matthew retains that

²⁴ Turner notes the function here of teaching the disciples regarding their discipleship, and their failure to grasp Jesus' power. Turner, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 244–245. Luz argues that in 8,27 the Evangelist speaks to the community, but the prior reference to Jesus as *κύριος* is not sufficient to assert that the disciples fully understand the identity of Jesus. Luz, *Matthäus* (see n. 5), 2.27–28.

²⁵ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 465.

aspect but also draws attention to the impact of grasping Jesus' identity, which is to form a basis for sufficient trust in him.

2.4. Matthew 14,31

After the stilling of the storm, the third use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* comes in a setting with the disciples in a boat when Jesus comes to them walking upon the water. The use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* comes in the second part of the story, Peter's walking on water, which Matthew has added to the Markan version.²⁶ Peter displays some trust in Jesus and belief in his power through stepping out of the boat and onto the water, and therefore this cannot be characterised as an absence of faith.²⁷ However, his attention is drawn to the waves and the wind, and he soon begins to sink, crying out *Κύριε, σῶσόν με* (14,30). This echoes the cry of the disciples in the boat during the storm, and similar observations can be made in terms of parallels to those seeking healing, and the trust and respect conveyed in it.²⁸

Yet Jesus response is again a critique. He says *Ὁλιγόπιστε, εἰς τί ἐδίστασας;* (14,31). This is the only use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* directed to a single disciple, and it could be that Peter functions symbolically here.²⁹ As in the previous instance, Peter is afraid

²⁶ The Matthean insertion of this scene strongly suggests that it plays an important role in Matthew's purpose. Thus Craig Keener notes that it forms part of Matthew's overall storyline of the developing faith of the disciples, albeit without observing the specific connections to the other 'small faith' stories. Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 407.

²⁷ It is important to note the faith, not just the failure. Osborne, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 575. Barth goes further to characterise Peter as trusting Jesus' word and waiting on his command. Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7), 287.

²⁸ Osborne, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 576.

²⁹ Thus France, although he suggests it is unclear if Peter is a model to follow. France, *Gospel of Matthew* (see n. 17), 567–568. Ben Cooper argues that Peter here is a model, but not a positive one, as he prefigures the story of the disciples from here on in the Gospel, including their failures. Ben Cooper,

(φοβέω 14,31).³⁰ Yet Jesus' question this time does not highlight fear but rather doubt. Διστάζω is only used here and in Matt 28,17 in the New Testament and it adds a cognitive aspect alongside the emotion of fear.³¹ The wind, and Peter's attention to it, leads him to doubt. The doubts come from focusing on the circumstances not on Jesus.³² In the context it appears that Peter doubts that he can walk all the way to Jesus, implying that he doubts Jesus' power to enact this miracle. The combination of trust and doubt indicates that 'small faith' is not unbelief but rather a temporary failure.³³ Again, in the situation Peter's trust is overwhelmed by fear and doubt, and those begin to drive his actions rather than his trust.

Further indication of a cognitive aspect related to 'small faith' is evident in the final reaction of the disciples to Jesus. Whereas in the previous instance of 'small faith' the disciples appear uncertain of Jesus' identity (8,27) they now confess Jesus as Ἀληθῶς

Incorporated Servanthood. Commitment and Discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew (LNTS; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 163. Davies and Allison describe Peter as an example of a believer who begins but then falters in the face of opposition, thus functioning as a call to greater faith. Davies and Allison, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 509. Morris argues it is part of Matthew's portrait of Peter as an impetuous disciple. Morris, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 383.

³⁰ This perhaps indicates the difference between these 'small faith' stories and instances where people call on Jesus to save them where faith is commended. The cry in these stories comes from a place of fear rather than of hope and trust.

³¹ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 381–383. F. Büchsel, κρίνω κατλ. *TDNT* 3.948–949

³² Eduard Schweizer describes Peter as 'double minded', and therefore faith as single-minded devotion to Jesus. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1975), 322–323. Cf Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7), 287.

³³ Thus, Osborne describes Peter reflecting some, but inadequate faith here, a divided mind whereby the situation overcomes his faith. Osborne, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 576; cf. Morris, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 383. Morgan sees Peter's action as "a spectacular demonstration of *pistis*", showing that the disciples' faith is both strong and weak. Morgan, *Roman* (see n. 4), 369.

θεοῦ υἱός (14,33).³⁴ This is accompanied by a physical response of prostration (προσκυνέω).³⁵ It appears that the demonstration of Jesus' power has enabled an increased understanding of Jesus' identity. Such growing understanding may be the basis for Peter's initial faith in contrast to the universal panic reflected in 8,25.

2.5. Matthew 16.8

In the fourth instance, Jesus warns the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus applies the description of ὀλιγόπιστος in response to the disciples discussing amongst themselves that they had forgotten to bring bread with them. The disciples are still preoccupied with their physical needs, and thus misinterpret what Jesus is saying, being unable to perceive the symbolic reference to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. As in 6,30, the issue is worry about material needs, although in this instance the disciples are reminded of Jesus' ability to provide, rather than the Father's.³⁶ As with the previous two failures, the disciples' actions are motivated by fear and worry rather than trust, and their trust is eclipsed by that worry.

There is a cognitive aspect to their failure reflected in Jesus' exclamation οὐπω νοεῖτε (16,9). The failure of the disciples to understand impacts their ability to trust.³⁷ Unlike the previous instance, this cognitive element is not explicitly focused on Jesus' identity. Instead the disciples have not yet learned from the practical demonstrations of

³⁴ The disciples are not ignorant as in the Markan parallel (6,52). Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7), 287.

³⁵ Moises Silva, *προσκυνέω*, *NIDNTTE* 4.150–154; H. Greeven, *προσκυνέω*, *TDNT* 6.758–766.

³⁶ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 503.

³⁷ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 506–507. Olivares suggests that the reader would expect the critique from Jesus to be that they are of 'little understanding' rather than 'little faith' given the cognitive focus of the passage. Olivares, "The Term ὀλιγόπιστος," (see n. 20), 279.

Jesus' miraculous activity in feeding the four thousand or the five thousand, those dramatic demonstrations of the principle taught in Matt 6,25–34. It is Jesus' ability to provide that is foregrounded, although this evidently has implications for his identity. Their forgetfulness regarding what they have witnessed (οὐδὲ μνημονεύετε 16,9) is striking as this scene follows closely on the feeding of the four thousand, with only the demand for a sign intervening. Thus, it appears that in 'small faith' a lack of trust and a lack of understanding may be combined.

The use of οὐπω alongside the cognitive aspect of their failure is also significant in light of what follows. Immediately after this scene is Peter's confession, a significant point in the narrative for Matthew (as for Mark).³⁸ Jesus' response in the scene on the boat leads to a greater understanding for the disciples.³⁹ Explicitly, that greater understanding is regarding the real meaning of Jesus' warning in 16,6. However, the context suggests that this may be the point at which the implications of what Peter has seen and heard from Jesus bring him to the realisation that he will express in 16,16, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. While the confession of 16,16 also echoes 14,33, the lack of understanding in 16,6 indicates that at that point the disciples have not grasped the implications of their statement. Where 14,33 is a spontaneous response to a remarkable event, the confession in 16,16 appears to be more considered, reflecting a thought-through position on Jesus' identity. If so, there may be the further implication

³⁸ Matthew makes the connection closer than Mark, omitting the intervening healing that Mark includes. France identifies this as the significant turning point in the narrative. France, *Gospel of Matthew* (see n. 17), 3.

³⁹ Unlike the Markan version. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 501.

that this is the point where Peter's 'small faith' is now overcome, or at least there is a degree of progression.⁴⁰

3. The function of the set in Matthew

The function of these four instances in Matthew is to first present a standard of trust for the audience, and then through failures and exhortations to encourage the Gospel audience towards such trust. The common expressions tie together an existing set of passages, forming a rhetorical unit that presents a series of ways in which trust may fall short. The rhetorical questions highlight the way in which trust falls short, through fear, doubt, or a preoccupied discussion about material needs. Worries about personal safety or material provision overwhelm the trust of the disciples on each occasion, resulting in Jesus' call that reminds the audience of the kind of trust that is the ideal.⁴¹ For the audience, they work together reinforcing that initial teaching, and connecting it with examples of situations where faith or trust may fall short. Both individually and together these passages serve to call the audience towards trust that will not be swayed by circumstances.

While the 'small faith' set of passages serve to call the audience's attention back to 6,25–34 and the quality of faith there depicted, they do not merely point backwards. They also develop the idea of faith that was presented there. While in 6,25–34 trust is directed towards God as the provider and sustainer of all creation, the subsequent instances shift the locus of protection and provision to the person of Jesus. It is he who saves from the storm (8,26), who feeds the crowds (14,19–21; 15,35–38; cf. 16,9–10),

⁴⁰ Any progression between the instances of *ὀλιγόπιστος* is overlooked by Barth, "Glaube und Zweifel," (see n. 7), 283. Cf. Olivares, "The Term *ὀλιγόπιστος*," (see n. 20), 287.

⁴¹ Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 526–533, 556–559.

and who saves Peter from sinking (14,29–31). The initial call for trust in God is developed in a christological direction, so that the audience is clear that trust in God is not the entirety of their faith response, but that it must entail trust in Jesus as well.

Nijay Gupta suggests that *ὀλιγόπιστος* functions as a nickname for the disciples, noting it is used more often than *πιστός* to describe them.⁴² While this paper argues for a more substantial role in Matthean rhetoric for this expression, the idea of a nickname highlights one feature of the term. It is not used in a primarily literal sense, critiquing the size of the disciples' faith.⁴³ Those who take the term more literally run into an interpretative obstacle with the idea of 'mustard seed faith' that Matthew uses elsewhere.⁴⁴ That image is used to imply that even the smallest of faith can achieve the impossible. As has been seen, it is not the size of the disciples' faith which is the primary issue, but rather that their faith is overwhelmed at times by circumstances, so that their predominant attitude is no longer trust, with instead attitudes of worry, fear, or doubt instead shape their actions.

Rather than describing faith quantitatively, *ὀλιγόπιστος* functions to indicate that the disciples' faith falls short, and it is only by analysing how it is used can we clarify how it falls short. In each case, while there is some trust, that trust is distracted by circumstances. This is most evident when Peter walks on water, for it is when he takes his eyes off Jesus that he then falters. Similarly, in the other two cases the disciples place

⁴² Gupta, "Spirituality," (see n. 21), 119.

⁴³ Contra Nürnberger, who argues that it indicates "zu wenig oder zu schwaches Vertrauen." Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 445, although this is later qualified, see 525, 557. Cf. Olivares, "The Term *ὀλιγόπιστος*," (see n. 20), 289.

⁴⁴ On resolving 'small faith' and 'mustard-seed faith' see for example Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 521–523.

their focus on their physical needs, whether safety from the storm or their need for bread, rather than focusing upon Jesus. It is not about the quantity of faith so much as remaining focused upon the object of faith.

When the *ὀλιγόπιστος* passages direct us back to 6,25–34, we see that this initial standard of faith sets out both the proper orientation towards the object of faith and the means to achieve it. After the exhortation not to worry and linking that to the idea of ‘small faith’, the command Jesus gives is *ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον τὴν βασιλείαν [τοῦ θεοῦ] καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ* (6,33). By focusing on the activity of God in the world, which of course is embodied in Jesus, a disciple places their focus in the proper object of trust and faith.⁴⁵ This is the reason why even the smallest faith can do the impossible, for it is not about the amount of faith but the one in whom the faith is placed. In the world in which the Gospels were written, *πιστίς* could be placed in any number of people or deities. It is only when *πιστίς* is wholly focused upon Jesus that it is the sort of faith that Matthew seeks to evoke.

This function of the *ὀλιγόπιστος* passages is enhanced by the interaction between these stories and other Matthean language of faith. First is the exemplary and praiseworthy faith of the centurion, who has greater faith than those of Israel (8,5–13). His faith is a confident trust that Jesus can heal with only a word, not requiring his

⁴⁵ ‘Small faith’ does not imply an inability to believe, as Luz suggests. Luz, *Theology* (see n. 7), 68. The parallels with the Gentiles striving after material things indicates that seeking the kingdom entails action not merely attitude. Thus while Talbert observes the role of this passage in facilitating trust not merely commanding it, the facilitation is through more than just seeing the world differently. Talbert, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 92, 102. More helpful is Schweizer’s description of the need for undivided faith. Schweizer, *Matthew* (see n. 32), 165. Cf. Nürnberger, *Zweifelskonzepte* (see n. 4), 450–454. Pennington argues the attention to being undivided in 6,25–34 aligns with the argument of the Sermon as a whole. Pennington, *Sermon* (see n. 5), 251.

physical presence or touch. This comes just before the second use of *ὀλιγόπιστος*, and thus presents a contrast between the exemplary trust of this foreigner (especially notable given in 6,32 the nations are the anxious ones) and the failure of the disciples to trust.⁴⁶ The disciples' failure is further highlighted in contrast to the following series of demonstrations of faith from others (9,2.22.29). Then between the third and fourth uses of *ὀλιγόπιστος* is the Caananite woman (15,21–28), whom Jesus describes as having 'great faith' (*μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις* 15,28). Her 'great faith' is similarly a confident trust which in her case leads her to persist in seeking healing for her daughter, despite an apparent initial rejection. The absence of her daughter from the narrative suggests that, as with the centurion, her trust takes Jesus at his word. While these stories are not explicitly connected to the set of 'small faith' passages, their juxtaposition with the shortcomings of the disciples' faith is not accidental.⁴⁷ They form the positive side of rhetoric, demonstrating what the ideal faith of 6,25–34 looks like in practice, a persistent confidence in the good provision of God through Jesus.

3.1 Linguistics and the function of the Vocative

Having explored these passages exegetically, we can consider the significance of the use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* from a linguistic perspective. What is key here is that in each instance of *ὀλιγόπιστος* it appears in the vocative case. The vocative has notable functions, as will be seen from cross-linguistic research on the case. Stephen Runge is one of the few to have

⁴⁶ John Nolland notes that Luke softens the Gentile focus of the statement that the nations anxiously seek after material needs, implying more that it is a general human condition. John Nolland, *Luke* (WBC 35; 3 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1993), 2.693.

⁴⁷ Gupta describes how these characters function as models of faith. Gupta, "Spirituality," (see n. 21), 118. Cf. Olivares, "The Term *ὀλιγόπιστος*," (see n. 20) 287–288.

investigated the function of the vocative in the New Testament.⁴⁸ First, as the characters are already known, the vocative functions to give additional information. In the first instance, the vocative implies that those to whom Jesus is speaking are participating in the sort of worry that he is denouncing. Prior to that vocative, Jesus' teaching could be understood as general teaching on the sort of trust that should characterise his followers. The use of the vocative makes it clear that the teaching is a corrective, addressing a specific failure of those before him.⁴⁹ In the subsequent instances the narrative depicts the failures of the disciples before the vocative is used. Thus, rather than alerting us to the shortcomings, it forms part of a confronting recharacterisation. In each scene the disciples are explicitly referred to as disciples (8,23; 14,22; 16,5). By referring to them by another descriptor, and one that is at odds with the standard designation as disciples, a degree of dissonance is effected. It is the disciples of Jesus who the audience might expect to respond rightly to him, and yet they are characterised as falling short. This dissonance, coupled with the earlier observed centring of Jesus' words to the disciples in these scenes, heightens the impact upon the audience, drawing attention to the way that the disciples fall short of the ideal of trust.

Moving beyond Runge's New Testament study of the vocative to cross-linguistic evidence, there are several further significant functions of the vocative in these instances. One is that vocatives can function to shift the attention of the audience between the narrative and narrative frames.⁵⁰ As has been observed, the vocatives in

⁴⁸ Stephen E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010), 351–356.

⁴⁹ Cf. Luz, *Matthäus* (see n. 5), 1.480.

⁵⁰ James M. Hegarty, "Towards a Socio-Cognitive Orientation to Religious Text. A Case Study in Indian Epic Literature," in *Religious Narrative, Cognition, and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative* (eds. A. W. Geertz, et al.; London: Equinox, 2011), 242.

these passages would stand out to the audience.⁵¹ As greater attention is drawn to them, they can draw the audience's attention beyond the shortcoming in trust in the specific instance, towards the narrative frame of the ideal trust conveyed across the use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* in Matthew.

One final feature of the vocative is the close connection between vocatives and imperatives. Vocatives are often paired with imperatives, but even when they are paired with either a declarative or interrogative statement, the pragmatic force of the statement can be imperative.⁵² Thus when we look at the three uses of *ὀλιγόπιστος* (Matt 8,26; 14,31; 16,8) that are paired with rhetorical questions, we can see that those questions function implicitly as imperatives. In each case Jesus' words imply that the disciples are supposed to stop whatever it is they are doing instead of trusting – stop being afraid, stop doubting, stop discussing their lack of bread. We can observe then that Matthew has chosen in each case to convey the imperative sense through a rhetorical question. While it is tempting to suggest that a question softens the force of the rebuke, it seems that the opposite is in fact the case. Matthew deploys a similar pattern of vocative with rhetorical question against the Pharisees and Sadducees in 3,7 and 23,17.19 (cf. 18,32–33) where the question adds to the force of the rebuke. Thus it may be that Matthew heightens the urgency of responding to Jesus' challenge by

⁵¹ Lillian Parrott observes the attention-getting role of vocatives. Lillian A. Parrott, "Vocatives and Other Direct Address Forms. A Contrastive Study," *Oslo Studies in Language* 2, no. 1 (2010), 220.

⁵² Mohammed Q. Shormani and Mohammed A. Qarabesh, "Vocatives: Correlating the Syntax and Discourse at the Interface," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2013), 25–26; Lia Abuladze and Andreas Ludden, "The Vocative in Georgian," in *Vocative! Addressing between System and Performance* (eds. B. Sonnenhauser, et al.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 35–36; Roman Jakobson, "Zur Struktur des russischen Verbuns," in *Roman Jakobson, Selected Writings: Vol. II* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 10–11.

framing the rebuke in a way that suggests that disciples ought to know better. They should already trust in the singularly focused way outlined in 6,25–34.

3.2 Matthew 17.20

Having examined the *ὀλιγόπιστος* set, we can now turn to the final use of ‘small faith’ language in Matt 17,20. This instance is distinct, as *ὀλιγοπιστία* is a noun within a prepositional phrase rather than the preceding pattern of vocative adjectives.

Additionally, there is no rhetorical question paired with it. Yet at the same time, following on from such a deliberately crafted use of what is unusual vocabulary, we cannot treat the use of *ὀλιγοπιστία* as unconnected. The previous uses would shape how the audience encounters the term here. Therefore, the primary implication here is that the disciples still fall short of the ideal trust as set out in 6,25–34.

The variation in form, however, raises the question of why the earlier pattern is broken here. The first indicator from the immediate context is that in this case the disciples recognise their own failure, rather than receiving Jesus’ rebuke. Whereas in the previous instances it is Jesus who draws attention to the disciples’ lack of faith, here they realise that there is a problem and seek an answer from Jesus.

A second significant factor comes from the broader context. This is the only use of ‘small faith’ language that falls after the pivotal confession of Peter. The confession of 16,16 is a key turning point in the plot of Matthew, and signals a shift from a primary focus on the identity of Jesus, and thus the need to respond to him, to a focus on the mission of Jesus, with an accompanying greater attention to the ongoing life of

discipleship.⁵³ It also signals a development in the understanding of the disciples, especially paired with the revelatory experience of the Transfiguration (17,1–13), and thus a development of their relationship with Jesus. To continue with the same form of rebuke as earlier would imply that there had been no change in the faith of the disciples, despite their recognition of the messianic identity of Jesus. While the man's reference to τοῖς μαθηταῖς σου (17,16) may exclude those disciples on the mountain with Jesus, the repetition of οἱ μαθηταί (17,6.13.19) gives the impression of continuity of this group character, and thus Jesus' response in 17,20 includes all the disciples present. A picture of growth in faith may be undermined by Jesus' cry ὦ γενεὰ ἄπιστος καὶ διεστραμμένη (17,17), which is often interpreted as including the disciples.⁵⁴ Yet while the disciples fall short, as Luz observes they are described as having small faith rather than no faith.⁵⁵ There remains a contrast between the disciples' shortcoming and the faithless generation, for Jesus' response to the disciples is less harsh than his general cry of despair.

The focus with regard to the disciples in 17,14–20 is less on trust in Jesus as a response to his identity, but on the ongoing trust needed to share in God's power in a

⁵³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC; 2 vols.; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993–1995), 463, 474, 477. Konradt argues that from this point there is a greater use of faith-language with regard to the disciples, rather than the crowds, as the focus of the Gospel shifts to preparing the disciples for discipleship after Jesus' departure. Konradt, "Rede," (see n. 4), 447. A contrary position is taken by van Aarde, who instead sees Matthew's presentation of Peter's confession as another display of small faith, given the contrasts of 16,16 and 16,23. However, while Peter's faith may not yet be perfect, that does not exclude positive development. van Aarde, "Little Faith," (see n. 22), 4.

⁵⁴ Osborne, *Matthew* (see n. 417), 656; France, *Gospel of Matthew* (see n. 17), 660–661; Morris, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 447; Morgan, *Roman* (see n. 4), 369; Davies and Allison, *Matthew* (see n. 3), 724. Seeing a distinction between the unbelief of the crowd and the disciples are Hagner, *Matthew* (see n. 53), 2.504; Turner, *Matthew* (see n. 17), 424.

⁵⁵ Luz, *Matthäus* (see n. 5), 2.522.

life of discipleship. The disciples are told that it is their 'small faith' that prevented them from casting out the demon from the sick boy (17,19–20). Their failure is surprising given Jesus has earlier commissioned them with power to cast out evil spirits (10,1.8). In view of the connotations of trust in *ὀλιγοπιστία*, the most plausible explanation is that the disciples have sought to utilise the power given by Jesus of their own accord, rather than from an attitude of trust and reliance upon God. Thus the disciples display a similar failure to Peter when walking on water, by failing to keep trusting in the delegated power of Jesus. Their trust in Jesus that is connected to the revelation of his identity is not a momentary trust, but ought to be an ongoing relationship of trust. Such ongoing trust is vital for them in their discipleship and is what enables them to access God's power as they play their part in God's mission.

4. Conclusion

The Matthean use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* forms part of a deliberate strategy from the author to evoke a particular sort of belief in his audience. The initial use of the term in 6,30 comes within a passage of teaching which sets ideal faith at odds with worry over one's life and the material needs associated with it. The audience is instead exhorted to a singular focus on seeking God's kingdom and righteousness. A set of loosely connected stories in the Markan narrative has been appropriated to deliberately link back to the initial instance. In each case the faith of the disciples falls short of the ideal and they are rebuked with *ὀλιγόπιστος*. The effect for the audience is to recall the ideal standard of wholehearted trust in 6,25–34, thereby encouraging them not to fall short as the disciples did. However, the focus is not solely upon trust, as an understanding of Jesus' identity and thus his role as provider and protector underpins trust. Linguistic studies of the vocative highlight the way that Matthew's use of it would effect this goal, through

a striking recharacterization of the disciples, through drawing our attention from the narrative back to the narrative frame, and by emphasising the imperative force of Jesus' rhetorical questions. The use of the cognate noun *ὀλιγοπιστία* in 17,20 can be understood in light of the preceding pattern as a similar call back to undivided trust. As the idea of an undivided response to God is prominent in Matthew, whether in the Sermon on the Mount's call to an internal as well as external response, or the condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, so too the use of *ὀλιγόπιστος* is crafted to encourage wholehearted trust as the ideal response for the Gospel audience.