


The Residue of Matthean Polemics in the Ascension of Isaiah*

WARREN C. CAMPBELL 

University of Notre Dame – Theology, 130 Malloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA.
Email: wcampbel@nd.edu

This article explores the literary relationship between the Matthean tradition and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a second-century pseudepigraphon detailing Isaiah's visions of the 'Beloved' and his polemical (and fatal) engagement with the 'false prophet' Belkira. While the lexical affiliation between these texts has been a point of interest, the discussion has oscillated between types of sources utilised, whether gospel material mutually shared with Matthew or Matthew itself. Though this paper details lexical contact, it pushes beyond philological similarity and posits narrative imitations as well as shared polemical strategies. The result is that Isaiah is more readily seen as a figure fashioned after the Matthean Jesus, and the 'martyred prophet' motif that ripples throughout the Gospel of Matthew as appropriated and narrativised by the *Ascension of Isaiah* for a second-century conflict over prophetic practices.

Keywords: Ascension of Isaiah, Matthew, reception, Jewish-Christian relations, Jewish-Christianity, reception history, Gospels

In challenging the rather limited range of possible authorial circles and religious affiliations that scholars proffer for the so-called 'pseudepigrapha', James R. Davila asks his reader to imagine the signature features of a pseudepigraphon composed by the author(s) of the Gospel of Matthew.¹ Davila presses

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2018 Annual SBL Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the 2018 Graduate Enoch Seminar in Lausanne, Switzerland. I would like to thank Judith Newman, John Marshall, Susanna Drake, David Lincicum, Hans Moscicke and the anonymous reviewer for *NTS* for their productive insights and formative comments. Special thanks to Terence Donaldson for supervising an earlier version of this project.

1 The set of authorial possibilities suggested by Davila include proselytes, God-fearers, syncretistic Jews, sympathisers, varieties of Torah obedient early Christians, Judaising gentile Christians, as well as non- or quasi-Jewish Israelites such as Samaritans or Galileans (J. R. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (JSJSup 105; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 10–60).

further into this imaginative exercise: 'It would not be taking a great liberty to imagine the author of Matthew writing ... a pseudepigraphon about, say, visions of Moses ... [which] would include Jewish signature features ... [as well as] *vaticinia ex eventu* or editorial foreshadowing regarding Jesus and early Christian theology.'² The utility of Davila's imagining extends beyond his immediate aims in expanding authorial and religious boundaries, for not only does it highlight the close convictional worlds shared by texts that are often separated by scholarly and ecclesial canons, but it also calls to mind the influence of Matthew upon later pseudepigrapha in particular.

This paper analyses the reception of the Matthean tradition in the Ascension of Isaiah (AscIs), a text remarkably similar to the pseudepigraphon described by Davila. The present concern is not to suggest that these texts share overlapping authorial circles, but to inquire into the ways in which the Ascension of Isaiah receives, mimics, and bends the Matthean tradition for its own (polemical) purposes. Progressing in concentric sections, which consider lexical contact, narrative imitation and the shared polemical trope of martyred prophets, the argument offered here is that the Ascension of Isaiah has fashioned Isaiah after the Matthean Jesus and utilises the tradition of martyred prophets as a means of perpetuating Matthew's polemical tactic against leadership parties in order to gain rhetorical advantage over perceived opponents and substantiate its own group praxis. In this regard, the Matthean tradition has provided a framework that is suitable for addressing the later and analogous interests of the Ascension of Isaiah. First, however, some positioning comments about this pseudepigraphon.

1. Positioning the Ascension of Isaiah

The Ascension of Isaiah is typically dated between 80 and 120 CE.³ While matters of composition are still active questions, the Ascension of Isaiah is probably a composite work of two sources, the 'Martyrdom of Isaiah' (1–5) and the 'Ascension of Isaiah' (6–11).⁴ This textual stitching suggests, for many, that the

2 Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*, 40.

3 R. H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900) xliv–xlv; E. Hammershaimb, *Das Martyrium Jesajas* (JSRZ 2.1; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1973) 19; R. Bauckham, 'The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity, and Date', *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 363–90, at 381–2; J. Dochhorn, 'Die Ascensio Isaiæ', *Unterweisung in erzählender Form* (ed. G. S. Oegema; JSRZ VI.1.2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005) 1–46, at 25.

4 Most scholars now depart from the theory proposed by Charles (*The Ascension of Isaiah*, xlv) in which the Ascension of Isaiah comprises three discrete texts, the 'Martyrdom of Isaiah' (1.1, 2a; 2.1–8; 2.10–3.12; 5.1b–14), the 'Testament of Hezekiah' (3.13b–4.18) and the 'Vision of Isaiah' (6–11) (e.g. M. Pesce, 'Presupposti per l'utilizzazione storica dell'Ascensione di Isaiä', *Isaiä, il Diletto e la Chiesa: visione ed esegesi profetica cristiano-primitiva*

Ascension of Isaiah reflects the desire of a 'prophetic school'⁵ to defend and authenticate heavenly ascent visions by embossing the practice upon an esteemed figure within the Jewish tradition.⁶ More information concerning its perceived opponents is given in AscIs 3 (vv. 21–31), a description of the 'present' that is set as Isaiah's futuristic vision. Those denounced are 'disciples' of the Beloved who abandon the teaching of the twelve apostles (3.21); they are 'lawless elders' (πρεσβύτεροι ἄνομοι) and 'unrighteous shepherds' (ποιμένες ἄδικοι) who fail to tend to the sheep properly (3.24).⁷ Consequently, there is an overall rejection of prophecy, including Isaiah's visionary experiences (AscIs 3.13–4.18; 6–11).⁸ This polemical characterisation of the 'lawless elders' as those who reject prophecy and true prophets may, as Jan Bremmer observes, reflect the wider tendency to minimise or omit the role of prophets in developing hierarchies of ecclesial leaders, to critically evaluate itinerant prophets and to warn against 'false prophets' in various early Christian texts.⁹

nell'Ascensione di Isaia (Texte e Ricerche di Scienze Religiose 20; Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1983) 40–4). Bauckham, however, has rejected the dominant bipartite source-critical construction, adopted by Acerbi, Pesce and Norelli, arguing instead for compositional unity ('Ascension of Isaiah', 369–72).

- 5 R. G. Hall, for instance, argues that the descriptions of Isaiah's prophetic school in 1.1–13, 2.7–11, 3.6–12 and 6.1–7.1 present a (somewhat) cohesive picture; the school is dispersed following the passing on of a prophetic tradition, it sporadically gathers to note and disseminate revelations among the leaders, and it is favourable to the content of the ascent vision ('The Ascension of Isaiah: Community Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity', *JBL* 109 (1990) 289–306, at 296). Moreover, when juxtaposing these descriptions with AscIs 3.21–31, the picture of a small and alienated prophetic group emerges which is in conflict with rival groups (297).
- 6 Following D. Frankfurter, 'Beyond "Jewish Christianity": Continuing Religious Sub-Cultures of the Second and Third Centuries and their Documents', *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christian in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (ed. A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 131–43, at 136; E. Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: commentarius* (Corpus Christianorum: Series Apocryphorum 8; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995) 49; A. Acerbi, *L'Ascensione di Isaia: cristologia e profetismo in Siria nei primi decenni del II secolo* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1989) 246; Hall, 'The Ascension of Isaiah', 289–99.
- 7 All citations from *P.Amh.* 1.1 are from B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *The Amherst Papyri, Being an Account of the Greek Papyri in the Collection of the Right Hon. Lord Amherst of Hackney, F.S.A. at Didlington Hall, Norfolk*, vol. 1: *The Ascension of Isaiah and Other Theological Fragments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1900) 4–14.
- 8 AscIs 3.31: καὶ ἐξαφήσουσιν τὰς προφητείας τῶν προφητῶν τῶν πρὸ ἐμοῦ καὶ τὰς ὁράσεις μου ταύτας καταργήσουσιν ἵνα τὰ [ὀ]ρέγμ[α]τ[α] τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν λαλήσωσιν.
- 9 On this point, Bremmer cites Herm. Vis. 3.5.1; Herm. Sim. 9.15.4, 16.5, 25.2; Herm. Mand. 11.1–21; Did. 11.3–12; Origen, *Cels.* 7.9, 11; 1 John 4.1–3; 2 Pet 2.1 (J. N. Bremmer, 'The Domestication of Early Christian Prophecy and the *Ascension of Isaiah*', *The Ascension of Isaiah* (ed. J. N. Bremmer, T. R. Karmann and T. Nicklas; SECA 11; Leuven: Peeters, 2016) 1–20, at 8–10). Cf. also D. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

The religious affiliation of the Ascension of Isaiah has nevertheless proved elusive as scholars interested in its religious self-definition and contribution to the history of Jewish–Christian relations have reached antithetical conclusions, highlighting the friction that arises when this text is pressured into one of only two monolithic religious taxa.¹⁰ Since a number of scholars have complicated the process and assumptions that guide certain pseudepigrapha into discreet religious affiliations (in most cases the operative and mutually exclusive partitions are ‘Christian’ and ‘Jewish’),¹¹ David Frankfurter, among others, has found it appropriate to resist this friction and to conceptualise the Ascension of Isaiah as reflective of an early movement of Christ-devotees characterised by a ‘prophetic sectarianism’ with a christological focus, which self-consciously operates from within a pluriform ancient Judaism as it pushes back against perceived opponents.¹² The Ascension of Isaiah resists framing as simply a Jewish or Christian text in competition with the other. As Frankfurter notes, ‘calling it “Christian” or “Jewish” in a *mutually exclusive* sense will not suffice’.¹³

1983) 209; E. Norelli, ‘The Political Issue of the Ascension of Isaiah: Some Remarks on Jonathan Knight’s Thesis, and Some Methodological Problem’, *Early Christian Voices: In Texts, Traditions, and Symbols. Essays in Honor of François Bovon* (ed. D. H. Warren, A. G. Brock and D. W. Pao; Boston: Brill, 2003) 267–82, at 269; Frankfurter, ‘Beyond “Jewish Christianity”’, 137.

- 10 Greg Carey, on the one hand, suggests that the Ascension of Isaiah exhibits an ‘early Christian polemic against Judaism’ (G. Carey, ‘The *Ascension of Isaiah*: An Example of Early Christian Narrative Polemic’, *JSP* 17 (1998) 65–78; see also B. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 537–8). Pierluigi Piovanelli, on the other hand, draws close associations between the *Ascension of Isaiah* and Jewish mysticism from the Hekhalot tradition. In this reading, the polemical element of the text reflects an internecine Jewish debate in which a small group seeks to defend communal practices in the face of neighbouring communities (P. Piovanelli, ‘“A Door into an Alien World”: Reading the Ascension of Isaiah as a Jewish Mystical Text’, Bremmer, Karmann and Nicklas, eds., *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 119–44, at 129–30; see also M. Henning and T. Nicklas, ‘Question of Self-Designation in the *Ascension of Isaiah*’, Bremmer, Karmann and Nicklas, eds., *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 175–98).
- 11 See e.g. R. Kraft, ‘Setting the Stage and Framing Some Central Questions’, *JSJ* 32 (2001) 371–95, repr. in R. Kraft, *Exploring the Scripturesque: Jewish Texts and their Christian Contexts* (JSJSup 137; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 35–60; cf. also R. Kraft, ‘The Pseudepigrapha in Christianity’, *Exploring the Scripturesque*, 3–33; Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*, 10–60; M. de Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature: The Case of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (SVTP 18; Leiden: Brill, 2003), esp. 18–28; Frankfurter, ‘Beyond “Jewish Christianity”’, 131–43, esp. 134–5. See also J. Z. Smith, ‘Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism’, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) 1–11, at 4.
- 12 Frankfurter, ‘Beyond “Jewish Christianity”’, 135–6, 139.
- 13 Frankfurter, ‘Beyond “Jewish Christianity”’, 137 (emphasis original).

2. Lexical Contact between the Matthean Tradition and the Ascension of Isaiah

The only extant Greek witness to the Ascension of Isaiah is found in *P.Amh.* 1.1, which provides a Greek version of AscIs 2.4b–4.4a.¹⁴ While fragmentary, it is fortuitous, for some of the strongest lexical associations between Matthew and the Ascension of Isaiah occur in AscIs 3.13–4.13.

2.1 AscIs 3.13–14

Joseph Verheyden has considered a number of potential affiliations with the Matthean tradition in AscIs 3.13.¹⁵ The strongest of these associations include the use of the noun ἡ εἰδέα ('form', 'appearance'), which, within first- and second-century gospel literature, is only used with a christological connotation in AscIs 3.13 and in Matt 28.3 (ἦν δὲ ἡ εἰδέα αὐτοῦ ὡς ἀστραπή). The reference to twelve disciples in AscIs 3.13 (17) (ἡ τῶν δώδεκα μαθητεία) appears frequently in Matthew, and while reference to 'the twelve' is found throughout the Synoptics (cf. Mark 3.14; 4.10; 6.7; 9.35; Luke 6.13; 8.1; 9.1), the full expression is more Matthean (Matt 10.1–5; 11.1; 20.17; 26.20). Finally, the verb δειγματίζω ('make show of'/'expose') in AscIs 3.13 is rarely used in early Christian texts (Matt 1.19; Col 2.15) and since the use of Matt 1.18–19 in AscIs 11.2–15 (or the mutual use of birth narrative material)¹⁶ is strongly convincing (see section 3.1 below), the use of δειγματίζω in AscIs 3.13 might also betray influence from this portion of Matthew.

More substantially, in Matt 26.31b, the disciples are told, πάντες ὑμεῖς σκανδαλισθήσεσθε ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ταύτῃ, and in AscIs 3.14 they are similarly described (*P.Amh.* 1.1 ix.16–19: κ[α]ὶ δώδεκα οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ

14 Grenfell and Hunt, *The Amherst Papyri*, 1.1. On *P.Amh.* 1.1, see T. J. Kraus, 'The *P.Amh.* I 1 (*Ascension of Isaiah*): What a Manuscript Tells about a Text and its World', Bremmer, Karmann and Nicklas, eds., *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 387–402.

15 J. Verheyden, 'L'Ascension d'Isaïe et l'Évangile de Matthieu: examen de AI 3, 13–8', *The New Testament in Early Christianity: la réception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le christianisme primitif* (ed. J.-M. Sevrin; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989) 247–74, at 255, 264; cf. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 18–21. AscIs 3.13 (*P.Amh.* 1.1 viii.16–ix.16): ἦν γὰρ ὁ Βελιάρ ἐν θυμῷ [ἐ]πι Ἡσαίαν ἀπὸ τῆς [ὀρά]σεως καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ δειγματισμοῦ ὅτι [ἐ] δειγματίσεν τὸν [Σ]αμαήλ, καὶ ὅτι δι' αὐτοῦ ἐφανερώθη ἡ ἐξέλευσις [τοῦ ἀγα]πητοῦ ἐκ [τοῦ ἐβδ]όμου οὐρα[νοῦ] καὶ ἡ μεταμόρφωσις αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἡ κατάβασις αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἡ εἰδέα ἦν δεῖ αὐτὸν μεταμορφωθῆναι ἐν εἶδει ἀνθρώπου, καὶ ὁ διωγμὸς ὃν διωχθήσεται, καὶ αἱ κολάσεις αἷς δεῖ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ αὐτὸν κολάσαι, καὶ ἡ τῶν δώδεκα μαθητεία, καὶ ὡς δεῖ αὐτὸν μετὰ ἀνδρῶν κακοποιῶν σταυρωθῆναι, καὶ ὅτι ἐν μνημε[ί]ῳ ταφῆσεται (Grenfell and Hunt, *The Amherst Papyri*, 1.10; cf. also P. Bettio, A. G. Kossova, C. Leonardi, E. Norelli and L. Perrone, eds., *Ascensio Isaia: Textus* (CCSA 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995) 143).

16 E. Norelli, 'L'AI e il vangelo di Matteo', *L'Ascensione di Isaia: studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1994) 116–42.

σκανδαλισθήσονται). Verheyden highlights this contextual overlap, noting that the use of σκανδαλίζομαι to indicate a verbal action of the apostles with reference to Jesus is found only in Matt 26.31.¹⁷ The other point of interest is the substantial participle from τηρέω used to describe the guards at the sepulchre in AscIs 3.14b and Matt 27.54 and 28.4.

2.2 AscIs 3.15–17

In AscIs 3.15–16 multiple angels descend in order to open the sepulchre of the Beloved, who then sends out his disciples.¹⁸ Uniquely in the synoptic tradition, Matt 28.2 presents an ‘angel of the lord’ who descends from heaven in order to roll back the stone covering the door and sits upon it (ἄγγελος γὰρ κυρίου καταβάς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ προσελθὼν ἀπεκύλισεν τὸν λίθον). In the Gospel of Peter (9)36 two figures come down from the heavens near the sepulchre. The stone proceeds to roll away from the opening of the sepulchre, and after the two figures enter, three figures are seen coming out, with two supporting the third (Gos. Pet. 39). This scene is very reminiscent of AscIs 3.15–17, especially 3.17, in which the Beloved is sitting on the shoulders of the angels. The similarity between the Gospel of Peter and the Ascension of Isaiah undermines any unilinear conception of Matthean reception in AscIs 3.15–7, for the author of the Ascension of Isaiah is probably in contact with a plurality of Jesus traditions.¹⁹ Still, the Matthean tradition may function as a major resource for the development of the resurrection narrative in both the Gospel of Peter and the Ascension of Isaiah, which was then expanded by these two texts with either the aid of additional Jesus material or their own creative impulses.²⁰

17 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 265. There is, however, a Markan parallel that deserves attention (as Verheyden himself acknowledges). Mark 14.27 reads καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι πάντες σκανδαλισθήσεσθε. As in the Matthean context, the verb σκανδαλίζομαι is used here in Mark 14.27 with the apostles as the subject. The fuller prepositional phrase in AscIs 3.14a (ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ) and Matt 26.31b (ἐν ἐμοί) may tip the scales towards a Matthean source behind AscIs 3.14a.

18 *P.Amh.* 1.1 ix.22–x.7 (AscIs 3.15–16): καὶ ὡς ἡ κ[ατάβα]σις τοῦ ἀγγέ[λου τῆς] ἐκκλησίας τῆ[ς] ἐν οὐρα]νῳ ... με ... τος ἐν ταῖς ἐ[σχάταις] ἡμ[έ]ραις, κα[ὶ] ... ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ πν[εύματος] τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ Μιχαὴλ ἄρχων τῶν ἀγγέλων ἁγίων ὅτι τῆ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ αὐτοῦ ἀνοίχουσιν τὸ μνημονεῖον (Grenfell and Hunt, *The Amherst Papyrus*, 1.11).

19 See P. M. Edo, ‘A Revision of the Origin and Role of the Supporting Angels in the Gospel of Peter (10:39b)’, *VC* 68 (2014) 206–25.

20 Norelli, for example, is persuaded that both the descending angel in Matthew and the two angels in the Gospel of Peter and the Ascension of Isaiah arise from a tradition that was mutually used (and modified) by each of these three texts (‘L’AI e il vangelo di Matteo’, 150, contra W.-D. Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit vor Irenäus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987) 305). This view follows Norelli’s wider perspective regarding the relationship between the Gospel of Matthew and the Ascension of Isaiah, namely that both texts utilise pre-Matthean sources.

2.3 *AscIs 3.18a*

In both Matt 28.19 and AscIs 3.18a the disciples are directed to instruct all the gentiles (Matt 28.19: μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη; AscIs 3.18a: μαθητεύσουσιν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).²¹ As a result, Edouard Massaux suggests that the author of the Ascension of Isaiah was ‘inspired’ by the Matthean text, but does not elaborate further.²² Verheyden correctly identifies the similar expression in Luke 24.47, but notes that the parallel is not as formal as the one found in Matt 28.19.²³ While the influence of Isa 66.18 is relevant for the addition of καὶ πᾶσιν γλῶσσαν in AscIs 3.18a,²⁴ the phrase shows exact correspondence with the programmatic Matthean dictum and is similarly utilised in a context in which the disciples are ‘sent’ (AscIs 3.17: ὡς ἀποστελεῖ τοὺς μαθητάς; Matt 28.19: πορευθέντες οὖν).

2.4 *AscIs 4.3*

The use of φυτεία and φυτεύω in Matt 15.13 and AscIs 4.3 is worthy of note.²⁵ While there are obvious differences in the two contexts – the twelve apostles are the ones who plant in AscIs 4.3, whereas it is ὁ πατήρ who plants in Matt 15.13; the φυτεία is persecuted in the Ascension of Isaiah while it is uprooted in Matthew (ἐκκριζώω) – the overarching agriculture metaphor is strikingly similar and without parallel in Mark and Luke.²⁶

2.5 *AscIs 1.7*

In his address to Hezekiah in AscIs 1.7 Isaiah describes the *መንፈስ/mānfäs* (‘spirit’) as one who speaks through him.²⁷ In Matt 10.20 Jesus addresses his

21 Matt 28.19: πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. *P.Amh.* 1.1 x.13–17 (AscIs 3.18a): μαθητεύσουσιν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη καὶ πᾶσιν γλῶσσαν (Grenfell and Hunt, *The Amherst Papyri*, 1.11).

22 E. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus: The Later Christian Writings* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993) 55. Similarly, see E. Tisserant, *Ascension d’Isaïe: traduction de la version éthiopienne, avec les principales variantes des versions grecque, latines et slave* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1909) 11; Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 18–21.

23 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 264.

24 Norelli, ‘L’AI e il vangelo di Matteo’, 162.

25 Matthew 15.13: ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· πᾶσα φυτεία ἣν οὐκ ἐφύτευσεν ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ἐκκριζωθήσεται; *P. Amh.* 1.1 xiv.6–9 (AscIs 4.3): ὁ βασιλεὺς οὗτος τὴν φυτ[ε]ῖαν ἣν φυτεύσουσιν οἱ δώδεκα ἀπόστολοι τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ διώξ[ε]ι[ν], ... (Grenfell and Hunt, *The Amherst Papyri*, 1.14).

26 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 254 n. 19. For Tisserant, the use of ‘vine’ as a description of Israel (Isa 5.7) reflects earlier Jewish traditions (*Ascension d’Isaïe*, 117). Similarly, Köhler, following Tisserant, suggests that the imagery used here is based upon ‘alttestamentlichen Vorbildern’ (*Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums*, 306 n. 2). As a result, Köhler remains sceptical of any Matthean influence in AscIs 4.3 (*ibid.*, 306).

27 AscIs 1.7: ይቤሎ፡ አሳይያስ፡ ለሐዝቅያስ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ወአኮ፡ ባሕተቱ፡ በቅድመ፡ ምናሴ፡ ዘይቤሎ፡ ሕያው፡ አግዚአብሔር፡ ዘአተፈነው፡ ስም፡ ለኮ፡ ዓለም፡ ወሕያው፡ ፍቅሩ፡ ለአግዚአላየ፡ ወሕያው፡ መንፈስ፡ ዘበለዕሌየ፡ ይትናገር፡ ከም፡ ከሉን፡

disciples before sending them πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ (10.6), informing them that it is not they who speak but τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τὸ λαλοῦν ἐν ὑμῖν. There is a similar line in the Greek Legend (3.18: ζῆ τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ τὸ λαλοῦν ἐν ἐμοί),²⁸ which probably provides a witness to the Greek version of the Ethiopic line in AscIs 1.7, one that contains a construction very similar to the phrase found in Matt 10.20.²⁹

2.6 'The Beloved' (Ascl 3.13)

Finally, is there any affiliation between the use of 'the Beloved' (ἡφιζ [ἡφιζ]/ὁ ἀγαπητός) throughout the Ascension of Isaiah (1.4) and in Matt 12.18 (cf. 3.17; 17.5)? The use of Isa 42.1 in Matt 12.18 (ὁ ἀγαπητός μου εἰς ὃν εὐδόκησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου) is an enticing point of interest, for the designation of Jesus as 'the Beloved' by means of an Isaianic citation would appear to be a fitting resource for the appropriation of ὁ ἀγαπητός as the main christological title used throughout the Ascension of Isaiah.³⁰ Since the MT and the OG use terms that reflect the idea of a chosen one (יְרֻחֵם; ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου) rather than a 'beloved one', Matthew is probably employing (or fashioning) a Greek text with this modification. While this title appears in the baptism tradition (Matt 3.17; Mark 1.11; Luke 3.22) and is found outside of the gospel tradition (Eph 1.6; 2 Pet 1.17; Barn. 3.6), Matthew is most committed to the title by means of Isa 42.1 and thereby poses an interesting backdrop for the centralisation of 'the Beloved' as the main title used in the Ascension of Isaiah.³¹

Previous interest in the relationship between the Ascension of Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew has focused on the type of gospel tradition accessed by this later pseudepigraphon. On the one hand, Enrico Norelli has suggested that Matthew and the Ascension of Isaiah have made use of similar source material,³²

እላንቱ : ἡφιζ : ወላላ : ቃላት : ይጻርዓ : በጎበ : ምናሴ : ወልድክ : ወበግብረ : አደዊሁ : በሥቃየ : ሥጋየ : አሐውር : አነ ::
(Bettio et al., *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*, 47).

28 Although the Greek Legend is a later epitome of the Ascension of Isaiah, Norelli concludes that it remains a reliable witness to the Ethiopic text and is beneficial for exploring the Greek original (*Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 30).

29 While the notion of a πνεῦμα speaking through an individual (or a group of individuals) is found frequently (see Barn. 10.2; Herm. Sim. 9.1; Did. 11.7; 11.12, Acts 1.7; 4.25, Zech 7.12; Neh 9.30; 2 Sam 23.2), the precise formulation of this idea in Matt 10.20 and AscIs 1.7 is uncommon.

30 See also Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums*, 304 n. 2.

31 The correlation between AscIs 1.4 and Matt 3.17 is also flagged by M. Knibb ('Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah', *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. II (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985) 143–76, at 156) and Hammershaimb (*Das Martyrium Jesajas*, 24).

32 Norelli, 'L'AI e il vangelo di Matteo', 115–66, esp. 165–6; *idem*, 'La resurrezione di Gesù nell'Ascensione di Isaia', *CNS* 1 (1980) 315–66.

while Verheyden contends that the Ascension of Isaiah has incorporated a text approximate to the Gospel of Matthew.³³ The fuel for the debate is due, in part, to the modest nature of the lexical associations present between these texts, which act defiantly when pushed for precision.³⁴ Yet adjudicating this debate is not required for the larger aims at work here, as the distinction between ‘Matthew’ and ‘Matthew-like’ material can be negotiated separately once the various modes of reception have been offered and observed. Whether the Ascension of Isaiah has incorporated a ‘finished’ text of Matthew or has drawn upon a more basic form of the Matthean tradition that Matthew later consolidates, it operates within a deeply ‘Matthean’ presentation of the Jesus tradition.

3. Narrative Imitation in the Ascension of Isaiah

Turning from lexical contact to narrative imitation, Wolf-Dietrich Köhler’s observation is fitting: ‘sie [the AscIs] nicht die “Worte”, sondern die Geschichte Jesu zu ihrem Thema macht und rezipiert’.³⁵

3.1 Matthean Birth Narrative

Köhler and others have identified the following convergences between AscIs 11.2–15 and the Matthean birth narrative: (i) both Matthew and the Ascension of Isaiah present Bethlehem as the permanent residence of Mary and Joseph (AscIs 11.12, Matt 2.1, 5);³⁶ (ii) Joseph is only referred to as a carpenter in Matt 13.55 and AscIs 11.2; (iii) in Matt 1.18 and AscIs 11.3 the pregnancy of Mary is announced after the fact, not foretold as in the Lucan account; (iv) Joseph’s desire to leave Mary is attested in both Matt 1.19 and AscIs 11.3;³⁷ (v) the role of the angel in AscIs 11.4 and Matt 1.20–4 is to prevent Joseph from leaving Mary, not, as in the Lucan account, to foretell the announcement of pregnancy; and finally, (vi) both Matt 1.25 and AscIs 11.5 are eager to state explicitly that there were no sexual relations between Mary and Joseph prior to conception.³⁸ While the Ascension of Isaiah includes elements that go beyond the Matthew narrative, suggesting the incorporation of other material, a Matthean

33 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 247–74. See also J. Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (JSPSup 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 276–7.

34 Relevant here is the discussion in H. Koester, ‘Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?’, *JBL* 113 (1994) 293–7.

35 Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums*, 308.

36 Cf. Tisserant, *Ascension d’Isaïe*, 203; Acerbi, *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 150.

37 Cf. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 56, who also notes Prot. Jas. 14.1.

38 Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums*, 303–4; Acerbi, *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 152–3; T. R. Karmann, ‘Die Jungfrauengeburt in der *Ascensio Isaïae* und in anderen Texten des frühen Christentums’, Bremmer, Karmann and Nicklas, eds., *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 370–4.

base has certainly been integrated.³⁹ Thomas Karmann suggests further that a reader of the Ascension of Isaiah would probably fill the narrative ‘gaps’ in the nativity material with Matthean content (see AscIs 11.4 and Matt 1.20; AscIs 11.15 and Matt 2.13–23).⁴⁰ Moreover, such gaps might suggest literary dependence if positioned as instances in which the author of the Ascension of Isaiah is offering literary guidance to the reader.⁴¹

3.2 *Itinerant Prophets*

The Ascension of Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew both feature a traveling Jewish prophet together with an associated guild in conflict with perceived authorities. Erling Hammershaimb points to the affinity between the description of the prophets in AscIs 2.10–11 and the presentation of John the Baptist in Matt 3.4 (prophets clothed with garments of hair and dwelling in the ἐρημος in the region of Judea).⁴² For Matthew, the Pharisees, the Scribes and the Sadducees face the brunt of Jesus’ polemical exchanges⁴³ and for the Ascension of Isaiah, Isaiah is antagonistic towards the false prophet Belkira and defiant of the regal authorities (Manasseh), both of which are influenced by Beliar (AscIs 5.1, 15).

3.3 *Jerusalem*

In the Ascension of Isaiah Jerusalem is the central location of Beliar’s influence (AscIs 1.9), false prophesying (AscIs 1.9; 2.4), lawlessness (AscIs 2.4–7; 3.1–4) and the crucifixion of the Beloved (AscIs 11.20). It is also implied that Isaiah is executed in Jerusalem (AscIs 2.4; 5.1). In Matthew, while the inhabitants of Jerusalem are initially described in positive terms (Matt 3.5; 4.5; 4.25; 27.53 (‘the holy city’)), the city is the central location of the chief antagonists (Matt 15.1), as well as the place in which Jesus will undergo ‘great sufferings’ and ‘be killed’ (Matt 16.21;

39 See Karmann, ‘Die Jungfrauengeburt in der *Ascensio Isaiaei*’, 360.

40 Karmann, ‘Die Jungfrauengeburt in der *Ascensio Isaiaei*’, 373: ‘Eine Leser, der die Vorgeschichte des *Matthäusevangeliums* kennt, wird diese bei der Lektüre der *Ascensio* immer wieder einspielen, und zwar vor allem an den Punkten, die man in gewisser Weise als Leerstellen bezeichnen könnte.’

41 Karmann, ‘Die Jungfrauengeburt in der *Ascensio Isaiaei*’, 373: ‘Vielleicht sind die gerade erwähnten Leerstellen aber dennoch in gewisser Weise ein Indiz für literarische Abhängigkeit, und zwar wenn man sie als bewusste Leserlenkung des Autors interpretieren könnte.’

42 In AscIs 2.10 the prophets are περιβεβλημένοι (‘clothed’) in σάκκον (‘sackcloth’) and in 2.11 they only eat τίλλον[τε]ς ἐκ τῶν ὀρέων (‘plucking from the mountains’). In Matt 3.4, John the Baptist wears camel’s hair (τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τριχῶν καμήλου) and eats locusts and wild honey (ἡ δὲ τροφή ἦν αὐτοῦ ἀκρίδες καὶ μέλι ἄγριον). They both dwell in the wilderness (ἐρημος) in the region of Ἰουδαία (cf. Matt 3.1 and AscIs 3.8: ἀπὸ βηθλεεμ ἐκά[θι]σεν ἐν τῷ ὄρει ἐν τόπῳ ἐρήμῳ) (Hammershaimb, *Das Martyrium Jesajas*, 27 n. 10a).

43 See esp. Matt 9.3–7; 12.38–45; 15.1–14; 23.1–39.

cf. 20.18).⁴⁴ Finally, flowing from the discourse in Matt 24 regarding the destruction of the Temple (Matt 24.1–2), the testimony given at the trial scene in Matt 26 focuses on Jesus’ prophetic denunciation of the Temple (Matt 26.61: ‘This man said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God ...”). Similarly, in Isaiah’s trial scene he is accused of prophesying against Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (AscIs 3.6).

3.4 *Eschatological Discourse*

Massaux has identified certain eschatological and apocalyptic motifs in AscIs 3.21–4.19 that have notable parallels with Matt 24–25 (and, as Norelli has noted, Did. 16).⁴⁵ Massaux divides these common motifs into three groups: (i) common eschatological descriptions, (ii) descriptions of a coming antagonist, and (iii) common descriptions of the eschatological appearance of the protagonist. Under the first heading, Matt 24.10–12 describes a scenario of betrayal, mutual hatred and false prophets. These descriptions are all found in AscIs 3.21–9 as the disciples of the Beloved forsake the teaching of the apostles, the ‘shepherds’ and ‘elders’ hate each other, and there is an overall lack of trustworthy prophets. Secondly, Matt 24.5 makes the twin claim regarding the rise of false messianic self-designations and how these figures lead many astray. Beliar carries out these descriptions in AscIs 4.6 and 4.9. Finally, in AscIs 4.14 the moment of the ‘parousia’ is calculated and described. The $\lambda\omicron\mu\lambda\lambda\prime\alpha\gamma\omicron\zeta\iota$ will come ‘with his angels’ ($\sigma\mu\lambda\lambda\eta\tau\upsilon\prime/m\acute{a}sla\ m\acute{a}la\prime\alpha\kappa\tau\eta\upsilon$) and ‘with the glory of the seventh heaven’ ($\sigma\mu\lambda\lambda\ \acute{\eta}\nu\iota\kappa\tau\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\ \acute{\alpha}\sigma\lambda\acute{\alpha}\ \sigma\acute{\alpha}\beta\eta\alpha\tau\ \acute{\sigma}\acute{\alpha}\beta\alpha\ \acute{\sigma}\acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\gamma$) after 1,332 days. In Matt 25.31, $\acute{\omicron}\ \nu\iota\acute{\omicron}\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\rho\acute{\omega}\pi\omicron\upsilon$ will come $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\eta\ \delta\acute{\omicron}\acute{\zeta}\eta\ \acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ and $\acute{\pi}\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\epsilon\varsigma\ \omicron\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omicron\iota\ \mu\epsilon\tau\prime\ \acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$.⁴⁶

3.5 *Temptation*

While Isaiah is being cut in half, Belkira asks him to recount his status as a prophet and affirm the legitimacy of both Belkira and Manasseh (AscIs 5.3–6). This temptation scene is reminiscent of Matt 4 (esp. 4.8–9; cf. Luke 4.5–8).⁴⁷

44 Moreover, throughout the synoptic tradition, Jesus’ actions within the temple court play a central role in the progression of each narrative (see esp. P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 111–14; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 61–90).

45 Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 60–1; Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 173–4.

46 The parallel passage in Luke 9.26 records a fairly similar concept: $\acute{\omicron}\tau\alpha\upsilon\ \acute{\epsilon}\lambda\theta\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\eta\ \delta\acute{\omicron}\acute{\zeta}\eta\ \acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \pi\alpha\tau\rho\acute{\varsigma}\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\omicron\omega\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\omega\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega\upsilon$. In light of the adjectival addition ($\tau\omicron\omega\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\omega\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega\upsilon$) in Luke and the mutual use of the possessive pronoun in both Matt 25.31 and AscIs 4.14 ($\sigma\mu\lambda\lambda\eta\tau\upsilon\prime/m\acute{a}la\prime\alpha\kappa\tau\eta\upsilon$; $\omicron\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omicron\iota\ \mu\epsilon\tau\prime\ \acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$), the association between Matthew and the AscIs is slightly stronger.

47 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 270: ‘L’auteur de AI trouve en Mt 4 une des références les plus explicites au combat entre le Bien-Aimé et le Satan.’

In both instances, the protagonist is asked to defer authority to the antagonist in order to obtain a reward involving the ruling powers (AscIs 5.8; Matt 4.8–9). In Matt 4.8 Jesus is offered *πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν*, whereas Isaiah is promised that Manasseh, the princes of Judah and all the people of Jerusalem will reverence him (AscIs 5.8). Moreover, in his response to Belkira, Isaiah notes that Belkira is only able to take his skin and nothing else (AscIs 5.10: ‘For there is nothing further you can take except the skin of my body’).⁴⁸ Hammershaimb has signalled the reader to compare this passage in the Ascension of Isaiah with Matt 10.28a; Jesus’ statement to not be afraid (*μὴ φοβεῖσθε*) of the one who kills τὸ σῶμα but cannot kill τὴν ψυχὴν.⁴⁹

3.6 Group Resurrection

The point of interest in AscIs 9.17 is the reference to a body of individuals who ‘ascend’ (*ῥοστ/γᾶ’rəgu*) with the Beloved on the third day (cf. 9.16).⁵⁰ Similarly, in Matt 27.52, a number of tombs are opened at the moment of Jesus’ death and as a result, *πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων ἠγέρθησαν*. In agreement with Norelli,⁵¹ the use of *ῥοστ/γᾶ’ärəgu* in 9.17 evokes the idea of a group resurrection at the time of the Beloved’s own resurrection from the dead. As a result, Matthew has been suggested as a source for this portion of the Ascension of Isaiah, as this narrative aside is only found in the Matthean account.⁵²

Certainly other points of narrative imitation could be noted, such as the juxtaposition of Jesus and Isaiah with Moses, the modes of execution, the insistence that revealing information about the protagonist must remain private, and how both figures refer to their death as a ‘cup’.⁵³ The strength of these figural

48 AscIs 5.10: ἁδσσ : ἁδ-ἰη : ἄδ-ἄ-ἄ : ἡτ-ἰ-ῥ : ἁ-ῥ-ἁ : ῥ-ῥ-ῥ (Bettiole *et al.*, *Ascensio Isaiæ: Textus*, 75).

49 Hammershaimb, *Das Martyrium Jesajas*, 31. Matt 10.28: καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτενόντων τὸ σῶμα, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι · φοβεῖσθε δὲ μᾶλλον τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα ἀπολέσαι ἐν γαέννη.

50 AscIs 9.171: ὠ-ῥ-ῥ : ῥοστ : ἁ-ῥ-ῥ-ῥ-ῥ : ἰ-ἰ-ῥ : ῥ-ἁ-ῥ : ἡ-ῥ-ῥ-ῥ-ῥ : ἁ-ἁ-ἁ : ἁ-ῥ-ῥ : ἁ-ῥ-ἁ : ἁ-ῥ-ἁ : ὠ-ῥοστ : ῥ-ἁ-ῥ-ῥ (Bettiole *et al.*, *Ascensio Isaiæ: Textus*, 103).

51 The question posed by Norelli (*Ascensio Isaiæ: Commentarius*, 470) reflects the interpretive difficulty surrounding AscIs 9.17, namely, is this corporate ‘ascension’ in 9.17 referring to a group resurrection akin to the Matthean narrative, or to an ascension from the earth into the seventh heaven (as in AscIs 9.18)? Despite the repeated use of the same verb, Norelli rightly suggests a shift in 9.16–18, in which 9.16–17a refers to the resurrection from the dead and 9.17b–18 to the ascension into the seventh heaven.

52 Verheyden, ‘L’Ascension d’Isaïe et l’Évangile de Matthieu’, 265: ‘La connaissance de Mt 27,51–53 est peut-être à la source de AI 9,17 (E), concernant l’ascension de beaucoup de justes avec le Seigneur après sa résurrection.’

53 Belkira testifies that Isaiah claimed to have ‘[seen] more than Moses the prophet’ (AscIs 3.8: βλέπω πλέον Μωϋσή τοῦ προφήτου), countering Exod 33.20 (AscIs 3.9, ‘Moses said,

associations to suggest that the Matthean presentation of Jesus has contributed to the formation of the figure of Isaiah in the Ascension of Isaiah (as well as the presentation of ‘the Beloved’) lies primarily in their collective presence. In addition to this collection, it is also relevant to note that the Isaiah–Jesus linkage is found frequently in texts from the surrounding period (see e.g. Justin Martyr,⁵⁴ Tertullian⁵⁵ and Origen⁵⁶).

-
- “There is no man who can see the LORD and live.” But Isaiah has said, “I have seen the LORD, and behold I am alive”; cf. 4 Bar. 9.19–21). Jesus and Moses are also counterpointed rather forcefully in Matthew, as Dale Allison has noted a narrative sequence in Matthew that has Mosaic overtones (D. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 268). The actual mode of execution is not as obviously imitative as in the Martyrdom of Polycarp, though the method of crucifixion and sawing were both used by the Romans. As noted by van Henten, Suetonius makes the claim that Caligula adopted the practice of sawing people in half (J. W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002) 93 n. 23; Suetonius *Hist. Aug. Cal.* 27.3; see also Carey, ‘The Ascension of Isaiah’, 77; Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, 537). There may also be an imitative correlation between Isaiah’s final insistence to Hezekiah that the king not reveal the content of Isaiah’s vision to the ‘people of Israel’ (AscIs 11.39), the voice that tells Joseph and Mary not to reveal the vision they received to anyone in the nativity narrative (AscIs 11.11), and the Matthean Jesus’ insistence that his disciples should not tell anyone that he is ὁ χριστός (Matt 16.20) (cf. Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 553–4). Lastly, Isaiah refers to his own death as a ‘cup’ prepared for him by God (AscIs 5.13). Jesus also refers to his death as a cup throughout the synoptic tradition (Matt 20.22/Mark 10.38; Matt 26.39/Mark 14.36/Luke 22.42; cf. also Mart. Pol. 14.2; T. Ab. 1.3; 16.11–12; 17.16; 19.6, 16). This is therefore a non-exclusive parallel with the Matthean Jesus (see Hammershaimb, *Das Martyrium Jesajas*, 32; Knight, *Disciples*, 277 (though Knight does not mention any Synoptic parallels)).
- 54 Justin not only mentions the tradition of Isaiah being sawed in half, but also claims that Isaiah, particularly in the mode of his death, is a mystery of Christ (*Dial.* 120.5).
- 55 In his presentation of Jesus as an exemplar of patience, Tertullian picks up on the (analogous) description of Isaiah’s self-restraint during the execution (cf. ‘neither cried aloud nor wept’ (AscIs 5.14)) in *De patientia* 14.1, noting, *his patientiae viribus secatur Esaias et de domino non tacet* (J.-C. Fredouille, *De La patience* (SC 310; Paris: Cerf, 1984) 106 (cited in Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 14 n. 11)).
- 56 In his comment on Matt 13.57 (οὐκ ἔστιν προφήτης ἄτιμος εἰ μὴ ἐν τῇ πατρίδι καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ) Origen flags the tradition of Isaiah’s martyrdom from ‘the apocryphal Isaiah’ (which is further substantiated with Heb 11.37 (ἐπρίσθησαν, ‘they were sawed in half’)); see R. E. Heine, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 51–3. In his *Letter to Africanus* (9) the order of testimony is reversed and Heb 11.37 is shown to be truthful by means of reference to the tradition of Isaiah’s death. In this context, Origen also employs the final ‘Woe’ found in Matt 23.29–38 as further testimony that Isaiah was killed.

4. Martyred Prophets: Repurposing a Matthean Tool

Hans J. Schoeps inquired into the apparent assumption of ‘prophet murder’ in multiple New Testament texts⁵⁷ and, having noticed a lack of immediate textual resources to justify this assumption, attempted to locate the genesis of the concept. After surveying relevant texts in the Hebrew Bible (Jer 26.21–4; 2 Chron 24.20–2), Schoeps seized upon the Ascension of Isaiah (at least in its earliest Jewish layers) and the Lives of the Prophets as evidence of circulating material relevant for understanding the early Christian use of this theme.⁵⁸ Furthering the work of Schoeps, Odil H. Steck grounds the origins of this motif in a deuteronomic interpretation of Israel’s history and pinpoints Neh 9.26 as an initial instantiation of collective representation of the prophets.⁵⁹ Within this deuteronomic framework pre-exilic Israel is viewed as a disobedient nation to which prophets were sent in order to incite repentance, but Israel rejected and/or killed the prophets, which resulted in the national calamities in 722 and 587 BCE.⁶⁰ While the killed-prophet motif is not always found within this deuteronomic pattern,⁶¹ and, when it does appear, it is usually the rejection of the prophet’s *message* rather than his death,⁶² Steck has shown that the place of the prophets within the schema is fairly replete throughout 150 BCE–100 CE.⁶³

The Ascension of Isaiah shows continuity with earlier biblical traditions in that Isaiah is killed by a leadership group,⁶⁴ and the content of Isaiah’s visionary experience is the catalyst for his death.⁶⁵ Still, there are points of friction

57 See e.g. Matt 23.29–37; Acts 7.52; Heb 11.36–8; 1 Thess 2.15.

58 H. J. Schoeps, ‘Die jüdischen Prophetenmorde’, *Symbolae Biblicae Upsalienses* 2 (1943) 3–22; repr. in *Aus frühchristlicher Zeit: Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (ed. H. J. Schoeps; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1950) 126–43. Similarly, H. A. Fischel (‘Martyr and Prophet (A Study in Jewish Literature)’, *JQR* 3 (1947) 265–80, at 276–7) suggests that this motif became an established tradition in the early centuries CE. Regarding the rabbinic tradition, Fischel (‘Martyr and Prophet’, 271) identifies varying articulations of the motif, noting that the ‘words’ of the prophets are rejected (citing e.g. Lam. Rab. 24; S. ‘Olam Rab. 24; Pesiq. Rab. 153b), that all the prophets face persecution by their own people (citing Tanh. Mishpatim 12; Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 125af.; Lev. Rab. 13.2; Exod. Rab. 7; Lam. Rab. 4), and that the persecution of the prophets is used as the reason for the destruction of Jerusalem in the First Jewish War (citing Exod. Rab. 31; Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 14). See also G. S. Reynolds, ‘On the Qur’an and the Theme of Jews as “Killers of the Prophets”’, *al-Bayān* 10 (2012) 9–32, at 17.

59 O. H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchung zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967) 64–80. Cf. 2 Kings 17.7–20; 2 Chron 36.15–16; Jer 7.25–6; 25.4; 26.5; 29.19; 35.15; 44.4–6.

60 Steck, *Israel*, 63–4.

61 Ps 106; Tob 3.1–6; Bar. 1–2; 3 Macc. 2.2–20.

62 Dan 9.5–19; Ezra 9.6–15; T. Levi 16.2; Josephus, *Ant.* 9.265–7, 281.

63 Steck, *Israel*, 110–215, esp. 209–15.

64 Ascls 5.15; Jer 26.21; 1 Kings 18.4; 19.10; 2 Chron 24.21; Neh 9.26.

65 Ascls 5.1; Jer 26.21; Liv. Pro. 3.2; 6.1.

between the Ascension of Isaiah and the motif of 'killing the prophets'. First, the martyred prophet tradition often appears as a brief reference,⁶⁶ whereas the Ascension of Isaiah exemplifies a much more elaborate expression of this motif. The motif is a central component driving the plot of an extended narrative. More importantly, as noted by Steck, the Ascension of Isaiah is not concerned with the deuteronomistic pattern that often functions as a holder for this tradition.⁶⁷ Relatedly, the Ascension of Isaiah is also distinct from early Christian deployments of the 'killing the prophets' motif as an 'othering' resource exploited for anti-Judaic purposes.⁶⁸ In these instances, Jesus is placed as the crescendo in the lineage of martyred prophets in order to marshal a theological attack against Jews/Judaism. Rather, the theme of the martyred prophet in the final form of the Ascension of Isaiah appears to support larger communal concerns, insofar as it critiques neighbouring groups who reject points of prophetic practice cherished by this text (ascent visions) and solidifies such group praxis via its attribution to Isaiah.

In what probably reflects a burgeoning group of (largely) Jewish Christ-devotees in conflict with surrounding Jewish groups, Matthew depicts Jewish leadership parties as responsible for the condition of the 'sheep' (Matt 9.34–6; 10.6; 15.24), and presents Jesus as the one who is repeatedly counterpointed with the scribes and Pharisees on issues of praxis.⁶⁹ The tradition of martyred prophets

66 E.g. Jub. 1.12; Jas 5.10; T. Levi 16.2.

67 Steck, *Isaiah*, 245: 'Zwar ist das Gottesvolk größtenteils als abtrünnig vorausgesetzt, aber es fehlen aus Element B die Momente: Umkehrmahnung, Gebotsübermittlung, Sendung zu Israel; zum gewaltsamen Geschick führt u.a. Jesajas Gerichtsankündigung, und Täter ist nicht das Volk. Ich vermute vielmehr drei Traditionsschichten in MatJes, die dem Jesajageschick jeweils besondere Ausrichtung geben, aber mit der Tradition der generellen Aussage unmittelbar nichts zu tun haben.'

68 1 Thess 2.15; Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 74; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 95; Barn. 5.11.

69 Stephen Wilson has succinctly distilled the dual focus of the polemical element in Matthew, noting that the chief priests (οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς) and elders (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι) are presented in relation to the death of Jesus (Wilson points to Matt 16.21; 21.45; 26–8), whereas the conflict between Jesus, the Scribes (οἱ γραμματεῖς) and the Pharisees (οἱ Φαρισαῖοι) revolves around interpretation of Torah and group praxis (S. Wilson, *Related Strangers, Jews and Christians 70–170 CE* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 51). See also J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); H. van de Sandt, ed., *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2005); A. Runesson, 'Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict', *JBL* 127 (2008) 95–132 (see esp. 9 n. 3); D. C. Sim, 'Reconstructing the Social and Religious Milieu of Matthew: Methods, Sources, and Possible Results', *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in their Jewish and Christian Settings* (ed. H. van de Sandt and J. K. Zangenberg; Atlanta: SBL, 2008) 13–32, at 32; J. Verheyden, 'Jewish Christianity, A State of Affairs: Affinities and Differences with Respect to Matthew,

works to vilify the opponents of Matthew's in-group by associating them with a literarily deviant group and to validate the interpretive aims of the in-group as represented by their particular protagonist. Matthew depicts Jesus as, in part, a prophet (Matt 10.41; 13.57; 21.11) who is rejected by his contemporaries (Matt 21.38–9).⁷⁰ This presentation is fused with the larger 'martyred/persecuted-prophet' tradition, as is evidenced in Matt. 5.12, in which the whole premise is based upon knowledge of such a tradition and with which Jesus' disciples are associated. Moreover, Matthew presents Jesus as the climactic successor of this lineage, who is killed as a martyred prophet by a complex of Jewish and Roman leadership. This fate is noted poignantly in Matt 21.33–46 – the parable of the tenants.⁷¹ John Kloppenborg notes that 'Matthew's depiction of the "slaves" in the role of prophets in turn associates the "son" (= Jesus) with the prophets, something that Matthew is otherwise also quite happy to do'.⁷² The image of stoning in this vineyard parable also anticipates Matt 23.37, in which Jerusalem is described as a city that 'kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it'.⁷³ The latter text – Matt 23.29–37 – is perhaps the most overt display of this tradition in the Gospel of Matthew. As the narrative of Matthew unfolds, Jesus joins the tradition evoked in Matt 23.29–37 and is thereby associated with a valorised group, which, in turn, validates the array of interpretive issues occupying the polemical exchanges with other parties in the earlier portions of the narrative. While the motif serves Matthew's perspective on a 'gentile mission' (Matt 21.33–4; 28.19–20), it is also suggestive that this gospel employs an extended narrative form of the

James, and the Didache', *Matthew, James, and Didache*, 123–35, at 135; M. Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). For a 'soft' reading of Matthew as *extra muros*, see P. Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew's Gospel* (WUNT 117/177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); G. Stanton, 'Matthew's Gospel and the Damascus Document in Sociological Perspectives', *A Gospel for New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992) 85–107. For critical engagement with this literature, especially the ways in which certain studies problematically conceptualize 'Judaism' as a site of comparison with Matthew, see D. A. Kaden, *Matthew, Paul, and the Anthropology of Law* (WUNT 114/24; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 71–88.

70 M. Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected-Prophet Motif in Matthean Redaction* (JSNTSup 68; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 148–61.

71 In this parable, the landowner (οἰκοδεσπότης) sends his servants to the farmers of the vineyard (τοὺς δούλους αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς γεωργούς), who beat (ἔδειραν), kill (ἀπέκτειναν) and stone (ἐλιθοβόλησαν) the servants (21.33–4). The use of δούλος in 21.34–6 suggests an association with the tradition of martyred prophets (cf. 2 Kings 9.7; 17.13; Jer 7.25; 26.5; 29.19; 35.15; 44.4; Ezek 38.17; Zech 1.6 and Num 12.8, as well as 5 Ezra 1.32; 2.1).

72 J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (WUNT 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 181.

73 Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard*, 181.

martyred-prophet tradition as a mechanism by which other proximate groups are associated and, by implication, criticised.

The martyred-prophet motif has a similar import for both Matthew and the Ascension of Isaiah regarding group solidification. For with what is probably a similar religious affiliation, yet a different polemical context, the Ascension of Isaiah presents its own opposing 'leaders' in a manner that strongly echoes the Matthean style (see AscIs 3.24: 'And there will be many lawless elders and shepherds dealing wrongly by their own sheep') and displays friction with contemporary groups which do not accept the prophetic interests reflected in Isaiah's ascent vision (AscIs 3.27, 31).⁷⁴ The shared theme of martyred prophets is a powerful tool for solidifying these literary and social interests, validating communal concerns and vilifying envisioned opponents. Accordingly, the final form of the Ascension of Isaiah not only reveals Matthean lexemes and points of narrative imitation, but also shares the motif of martyred prophets, which is utilised for similar rhetorical and polemical goals.

5. Conclusion

In thinking about imagination and representation in early Christian martyrdom literature, Candida Moss rightly observes that any instance of literary reception that is intentionally imitative is necessarily interpretive.⁷⁵ The close association between imitation and interpretation is descriptive of the reception of the Matthean tradition in the Ascension of Isaiah. Since the Ascension of Isaiah shows lexical incorporation, narrative imitation and a shared polemical strategy with the Matthean tradition, it not only receives but interprets this gospel tradition for its own polemical context. Yet with interpretation comes morphology. While the martyred-prophet motif in Matthew is used by a group (centrally) comprised of Jewish Jesus-devotees who are in conflict with adjacent Jewish sub-groups, the Ascension of Isaiah, as it pivots towards new perceived opponents in new contexts, has modified this Matthean strategy for a more targeted debate concerning its own prophetic interests.

⁷⁴ See n. 6.

⁷⁵ C. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 4.