



[Matthew 8:5-13](#)

The healing of the centurion's servant

Date: 70 CE

Place: Antioch (majority view)

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Matthew

Reference:

8:5-13

Commentary:

Much scholarship has been devoted to establishing the Jewish context of Matthew's Gospel, with its Gentile context (including significantly the Roman imperial system) less discussed. Some scholars of the last decade or so, however, such as Warren Carter (see "Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 259-261), have sought to address this. There have been two dominant positions on this issue: 1) that the Matthean author is addressing a mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles, and as such, supports taking the salvific message of Jesus to both (see Brendan Byrne, "The Messiah in whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope,'" p. 55-73); and 2) the Gospel writer's community have suffered greatly at the hands of the Romans in Antioch, and wish to avoid the Gentile world as far as possible (see David Sim, "The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 19-48). In order to appreciate the complexity of the Matthean author's narrative, the Roman imperial context cannot be ignored, as it is alluded to in various episodes with varying degrees of subtlety.

In this passage, Jesus is approached by a Roman centurion in Capernaum (a small village on the northern shore of the Galilee), whose servant is ill. The centurion, clearly having heard of Jesus's reputation for healing the sick, begs him to come and heal his servant. Even though Jesus agrees, the centurion claims that he is unworthy to have Jesus enter his house, but his faith is strong enough that he believes just a word from Jesus will accomplish what he asks. Impressed by the blind faith of the centurion, Jesus not only heals his servant, but also proclaims the man's exceptional belief, and uses his faith as a basis to teach about the kingdom of heaven. Historically, however, it is likely that the "centurion" of this story would have been a Greek speaking soldier in an auxiliary unit belonging to the tetrarch Herod Antipas, as there are no Roman legions recorded as being present in Capernaum. Such auxiliaries were not Roman citizens, but were recruited from the non-Jewish populations of surrounding areas such as Phoenicia and Syria (see Richard France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 311). For further details of the military situation in Palestine at this time, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, volume 1, p. 362-367. The fact that the Roman army would not have been present in any significant way in this area during the time when Jesus was teaching makes this scene even more poignant, as the author has associated this character with Rome much more directly than he likely was in reality. In addition to representing Gentile faith, therefore, the soldier's role as a military man, portrayed by the Matthean author as representative of Rome's economic and political power, makes him an ideal example for Matthew to illustrate Jesus's superior authority via the centurion's recognition of it (see Warren Carter, "Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 274). By the time Matthew wrote, Roman soldiers would certainly have been present in Judea, and perhaps more significantly for the interpretation of this passage, Matthew's post-70 CE audience (likely in Antioch) would have come into contact with them frequently, constantly reminded of their status as imperially dominated. Just as the Matthew's centurion governs his troops, and is himself ultimately under Caesar's authority, Jesus is under the supreme authority of God, but himself is able to command and give authority to his disciples (10:8, 40). The fact that the centurion addresses Jesus as "Lord," which as Craig Keener points out, can be translated as strongly as "deity," but at the very least as something like "Sir," is another indicator of his deference (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 267).

There are only two stories in the Gospels, this being one of them, where Jesus heals Gentiles, and in both cases, the healing is done at a distance (see also Matthew 15:21-28; [Luke 7:2-10](#); Mark 7:24-30). Moreover, as Craig Keener notes, the teaching about Israel's perceived notion of their privilege is seemingly more central to the story than the actual healing of the servant (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 264). The notion of ethnicity is



extremely important to the Gospel writer. Craig Keener outlines the process of the centurion’s appeal to Jesus, which has his identity as a Gentile at its centre. The centurion first recognises that as a Gentile, he is an outsider to the Jewish people, and what is more, represents its oppressors. He understands, therefore, that he must acknowledge his dubious status as well as Israel’s privilege, in order to gain Jesus’s favour. Recognising that as a Jew, it is inappropriate for Jesus to enter the home of a Gentile, the centurion gives Jesus the option to perform the healing from a distance, which is an exceptional expression of faith (??????), as within both ancient Judaism and Roman culture it was uncommon for such deeds to be performed remotely (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 267 lists various examples, including Virgil, *Aeneid* I.142 and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 11:16).

As Craig Keener argues, the attitude that the Matthean author has towards the people of Israel (the “sons of the kingdom” in verse 12) is seemingly harsher than that represented in Luke’s rendition of the story (Luke 7:9). For the Matthean author, those who should in theory be closest to the truth frequently take it for granted (Jesus argues that the Jews, the “sons of the kingdom,” imagined at the eschatological banquet with Abraham, have assumed privilege because of their ethnic identity). On the other hand, the Gentile centurion, representing one who has come from the west (i.e. the Romans) joins those who will come from the east (Matthew has made reference to the non-Jewish magi from the east in [2:1-11](#)) (verse 11) in representing the mission to the Gentiles, which the Gospel writer sees as an important part of his audience’s calling.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Abraham](#)
- [authority](#)
- [Capernaum](#)
- [centurion](#)
- [eschatology](#)
- [ethnicity](#)
- [faith](#)
- [Gentiles](#)
- [healing](#)
- [Isaac](#)



- [Israel](#)
- [Jacob](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [kingdom of heaven](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [servant](#)
- [sons of the kingdom](#)

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