

Crowds as Character: A Narrative- Critical Study of Matthew 12:14-13:17

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Literary Approaches to the New Testament

INTRODUCTION

The study of the development and interaction of characters in Matthew's story is a formidable task. The literary-critic must take into account their interaction with each other and their setting in the plot of the implied author's story. In the interest of brevity, this paper will explore the characterization of crowds specifically in the context of Matthew 12:14-13:17. This portion of the narrative contains a series of events that prepare the implied reader for the crowd's eventual willingness to demand that Jesus be crucified. It sheds light on how Jesus perceives their behavior and attitudes. His perspective may be determined through the implied reader's understanding of how he views the religious leaders and the disciples. Therefore, we will format this paper by first discussing Jesus' ^{W.C.} apparent views concerning these groups. Then we will proceed to explore the crowd's ill-fated relationship to the religious leaders and their ambivalent attitude toward Jesus.

JESUS' PERSPECTIVE: RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND DISCIPLES

The Matthew 12:14-13:17 passage is representative of the entire gospel in that it portrays the religious leaders and the disciples as flat characters which exhibit fundamental root traits. The traits are diametrically opposed to one another in terms of how Matthew as narrator and Jesus perceive them and how the characters themselves demonstrate them. The religious leaders' role in the story is crucial because their character development sets the stage for Jesus' eventual betrayal by the crowds. On the other hand, Matthew characterizes the disciples in a somewhat less extensive, yet positive light. This characterization is an attempt to contrast behavior that pleases Jesus with behavior that displeases him.

Matthew 12:15 begins with the understanding that Jesus departed from the synagogue when he became aware of the Pharisees' conspiracy to destroy him (12:14). This departure may be interpreted by the implied reader as a reaction to the newly hatched plot. Evidently, Jesus realized the genuine danger of remaining in that place and that it was not yet his time to die. He had to confront them on his terms so as to reveal to the crowds the true nature of their religious leaders. This confrontation took place soon thereafter when Jesus healed the blind and mute demoniac in Matthew 12:22. The crowds expressed their amazement at Jesus' miracle and began to consider who he was (12:23). When the Pharisees heard about the miracle and the subsequent conversation, they accused Jesus of casting out the demons by Bezebul, the ruler of demons (12:24). The stage had been set. The implied reader is surely attentive to Jesus' forthcoming reply, knowing that the battle line has been drawn.

The narrator portrays himself as being privy to Jesus' mind when he indicates that Jesus knew the Pharisees' private thoughts and that Jesus prophetically revealed those thoughts to them. Matthew allows the implied reader an unique glimpse into the inner motivations of the Pharisees and Jesus so as to heighten the drama of the passage. The confrontation hit full force in the wider arena of their public verbal exchange. Jesus quickly homed in on the root characteristic of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:33-37. This characteristic is "evil" and it may also be attributed to the Sadducees, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, all of whom comprise the flat character "religious leaders." Jack Dean Kingsbury writes that this "root trait, or fundamental quality, characterizing the religious leaders harmonizes well with the dualism that pervades

