The Holy Spirit’s characterisation of the Matthean Jesus

This article contributes to the discourse on the characterisation of Jesus in the Matthean Gospel. Characterisation can happen in several ways, for example by letting the characters themselves act and speak, or by letting other characters talk about them or react towards them. It can also be done by a narrator who tells the reader about a character. The kind of character depends on the traits or personal qualities of that character and how that character performs in specific circumstances. Along with God himself, Jesus forms the principal character in the first gospel. His teachings and actions form the focus of attention, and the actions of other characters are directed at him. This article focusses on one aspect of characterisation, namely on how the Holy Spirit acts in support of Jesus. The evangelist utilises the actions of the Holy Spirit as a narrative strategy to gradually express the significant status of Jesus as main character.

Keywords: narrative criticism; historical narrative; characterisation; Jesus; Matthew; narrative; Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Reading gospels as narratives mostly involves two aspects: the one is to study the content of the narrative, in other words, what is told – the ‘story’. The other is to investigate how it is told; which rhetorical techniques are employed – the ‘discourse’ (Carter 1997:3; Kingsbury 1986:2; Stock 1994:3).2

The ‘story’ of a narrative includes events, setting and characters (Kingsbury 1986:9; Powell 2009:45–52; Viljoen 2018:8). Authors bring characters to life by way of characterisation (Anderson 1994:78; Bauer 1992:357; Powell 1990:51; Tolmie 1999:41). Characterisation can take place by letting the characters themselves act and speak, or by letting other characters talk about them or react to them. The author can also make use of a narrator who tells the reader about a character (Anderson 1994:78–80). The kind of character depends on the traits or personal qualities of that character (Powell 2009:48). The individual status of a character is defined in terms of the person’s relation to the main and other characters. Characters are involved in the incidents that are narrated. The features of a character should be interpreted in terms of the specific incident and the context of this incident (Edwards 1997:13; Tolmie 1999:42).

A variety of characters feature in Matthew’s Gospel. Characters can consist of individuals, such as John the Baptist, or character groups, such as the Pharisees or crowds. Characters can be human, though anthropomorphic beings, such as animals, can also act as characters. Along with God himself, Jesus is the single main character, the protagonist, in the Gospel. From the very beginning, He is introduced as the Son of David (Mt 1:1), Immanuel (Mt 1:23), and the Son of God (Mt 2:15). There are only a few instances where he is not the main actor in the ‘scenes’. However, all ‘scenes’ are related to Jesus. His teachings and actions form the focus of attention and the actions of other characters are directed at him. Matthew abbreviates his

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1. This literary paradigm in gospel studies should not invalidate historical and theological questions asked to the text (Hays 2013:17; Powell 1990:98; 2009:44). The gospels are non-fictional narratives based on historical events and persons (Merenlahti & Holoka 1999:38). The narrative worlds of the gospels are related in various ways to both the world of Jesus and the social world of the evangelist (Culpepper 1984:472). I read the story of Jesus not as a pure textual world, but as a text in the world. An actual author is communicating with actual readers within their concrete situation (cf. Luz 2007:15; Stock 1994:2).

2. Genette (1980) defines the difference between a ‘story’ and a ‘plot’ in Discours du récit. The ‘story’ (histoire) refers to the chronological sequence of events, and ‘plot’ to the way these events are presented in the narrative. When the events selected from the lives of people of certain times and places are combined into a series in relation to one another, a plot develops and the story becomes a narrative discourse (récit).

3. A character is a paradigm of constructed traits that a reader attaches to a name (Burnett 1993:16; Powell 2009:49).

4. Greimas (1983/1966:174–185, 192–212) defines the actants in narrative texts who fulfil actantial roles, for example the protagonist as the principle character or subject, the supporters (helpers) who assist the protagonist, the object(s) as the persons at whom the acts and values of the protagonist are directed, and the antagonists (opponents) as those who oppose the efforts of the protagonist (like the Pharisees and scribes) in the gospels. The plot develops as a result of the interrelation of such characters.
Markan source so that Jesus’s words are in the foreground at all times (Luz 2007:17; Powell 1990:54; Weren 1994:12).\(^5\)

This article investigates one aspect of the characterisation of the Matthean Jesus, namely how the Holy Spirit acts in support of Jesus. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the evangelist utilises the character of the Holy Spirit to communicate traits of Jesus. The involvement of the Spirit with Jesus is narrated in several instances, namely with the ‘genesis’ of Jesus, his baptism, when leading Jesus into the wilderness and with the Holy Spirit being bestowed upon him.

‘Generating’ Jesus

The first reference to the Holy Spirit occurs in the short narrative (Mt 1:18–25) that serves as commentary on the genealogy (Mt 1:1–17). Similar schemas of the birth announcement occur in the Old Testament (e.g. Gn 16:11; 17:19; Jdg 13:3–5; Is 7:14). Such announcements are related to the birth of important figures in the history of Israel, and are repeated with the birth of Jesus (Luz 2007:92).

Matthew 1:18–25 explains the virginal conception and birth of Jesus.\(^6\) Jesus’s conception is told to be the work of the Holy Spirit ‘ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύμονος ἀτός’ [she became pregnant through the Holy Spirit] (Mt 1:18) and ‘τὸ γάρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύμονος ἀτός ἀνεθήν’ [because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit] (Mt 1:20). This creative agency of the Holy Spirit does not explain how Jesus was born. According to Thomas Aquinas, Jesus is the creatura of the Holy Spirit (Lectura no. 111). The Holy Spirit is not the father of Jesus. Jesus is generated not by the ‘substantia’, but by the ‘virtus’ of the Holy Spirit (Dionisius bar Salibi 1.55 remarked: ‘Believe! Believe strongly! Do not question. Neither Gabriel nor Matthew was able to say how this happened’). The repetitive use of γενεσις-related lexemes in Matthew 1:1, 1:17c and 1:18 is significant as they echo the creation motifs of Genesis 1 and 2. The Holy Spirit is the creative power (Stock 1994:28). It seems that the ‘genesis’ of Jesus by the Holy Spirit alludes to God’s creative power through the Holy Spirit\(^7\) during creation.

The role of the Holy Spirit is emphasised by the way Matthew alludes to Isaiah 7:14\(^8\) in his first fulfilment citation. This citation is particularly solemn: ‘Ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλεσσοῦσιν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Εἱμαναναθή, ἢ ἔσται μεθερμηνευόμενον Μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ θεός’ [Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God with us’] (Mt 1:23). The Hebrew texts use ’almah’, which means a young woman of marriageable age, and not ‘betulah’, which means a virgin. The Septuagint (LXX) and Matthew 1:23 translates ’almah’ with ‘ἡ παρθένος’ [the virgin], confirming that she had not had sexual relations (Talbert 2010:34). Jesus’s miraculous conception is presented as the fulfilment of this prophecy by Isaiah, but it happens in a miraculous manner as Mary becomes pregnant by the Spirit. Matthew adds ‘πνεύμα’, as reference to the Spirit does not occur in Isaiah.

This recurring reference to the Spirit characterises the baby to be born. It demonstrates Jesus’s unique character and how this came to be. His uniqueness is further emphasised by the fact that Mary is called the mother of Jesus, but Joseph is not called his father. God is his Father.\(^9\) His conception by the Holy Spirit identifies Jesus as Son of God. In early Christian thought, the Holy Spirit was closely linked to eschatological sonship (Jn 3:5; Rm 8:9–17; Gl 4:6, 28–29; Davies & Allison 2004a:2001). The question then arises as to how the genealogy of Joseph could be applied to Jesus. According to Jewish practice, Joseph’s naming of the baby constituted legal recognition of the child as his own ( Mishna Baba Batra, 8.6).\(^10\) Jesus was ‘God with us’ through the Holy Spirit, while legally being Joseph’s son (Stock 1994:29).

The involvement of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’s ‘genesis’, reveals the unique character of Jesus. It tells readers who Jesus is and how he became this. His high status is emphasised. From his conception, he is endowed with the Holy Spirit. Although he is born from a human mother, he is the Son of God. He is Immanuel – ‘God with us’.

Descending on Jesus like a dove

Jesus’s status is confirmed when the Holy Spirit descends upon him when he comes out of the water after his baptism. The evangelist states that the heavens ‘were opened’, which is therefore assumed that Mark was first written then and was used by Matthew and Luke (De Silva 2004:166).\(^5\)

The unusual word order ‘Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν’ [But of Jesus the origin was as follows] of Matthew 1:18a with which this short narrative is introduced, links it with the concluding words of the genealogy, ‘ὃς τοῦ γονοῦ γενεας Σατανασσαρας’ [until the birth of Christ fourteen (generations)] in Matthew 1:17c. The repetition of the lexeme, γενεσις [of the genealogy] (Mt 1:1) emphasises this and serves the same purpose.

The heaven’s opened, which is portrayed as a visible event and not as a vision (Luz 2007:143). As the Holy Spirit descended upon David when Samuel anointed him as king (1 Sm 16:13), so does the Spirit descend upon the son of David. Jesus is anointed and empowered as the messianic king (Talbert 2010:57). The Jews would have regarded this as the fulfilment of the expectation of the relationship between the Spirit and the Messiah (cf. Is 11:2; Pss Sol 17:37; 1 En 49:3; 62:2).


10.'If a man said, “This is my son”, he may be believed’ (Mishnah, Baba Batra, 8.6).
All three of the Synoptic Gospels narrate this descent of the Holy Spirit as indicated in Table 1. While Mark only refers to the pneuma [the Spirit], Matthew adds that it is the Spirit of God, while leaving out the article (pneuma θεοῦ). Luke retains the article and adds that the Spirit is the holy one (τὸ ἅγιον τὸ ἅγιον) and that the Spirit came down as a dove (ὡς περιστεράς).

This vision of the descending dove seems to hark back to the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2 and Noah’s dove (Gen 8:8–12). Yet, there is probably more to it. Several ancient authors have noted that when gods gave testimony on matters, their voices were confirmed by visions from the heavens (Table 1: TOPICA). Cicero (Top 20.76–77) mentions among such signs the flight of birds in the air. The philosopher, Pythagoras, taught his disciples on bird omens and regarded birds as messengers from the gods sent to those whom the gods truly love (Lamblichus, Vit. Pythagoras, 6.1). In Persia, a dove was regarded as a royal bird and symbol for the divine power that filled a king (Luz 2007:143). In the proto-evangelium of James (9.1), Joseph received a rod and a dove came out of the rod and flew onto Joseph’s head. This sign was followed by the words of the priest: ‘Joseph, to you has fallen the good fortune to receive the virgin of the Lord.’ In the Synoptic Gospels both the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven are reported. An ancient Mediterranean reader would recognise this vision and voice as God’s testimony to legitimise Jesus as the worthy eschatological bearer of God’s Spirit (Davies & Allison 2004a:335; Viljoen 2019:2). Prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah and the Spirit are fulfilled (cf. Is 11:2; Jl 2:28–29; Ps Sol 17:37; 18:7). The Matthewian version adds the unique interjection ‘καὶ ἰδοὺ’ [and behold] with reference to this vision. This word and its Hebrew equivalent (hinneth) points to the unexpected and is associated with angelic appearances and theophanies (e.g., Gn 18:2; 28:13; Ezk 1:4; Jdg 14; Rv 19:11; Davies & Allison 2004a:206). Matthew emphasises the significance of this vision.

Several of Jesus’s character traits can be recognised during this event. The most outstanding traits are the following:

1. He becomes the Son of the Father as indicated by the Spirit descending upon him, the voice of God, and the manifestation of the Spirit as a dove.
2. He is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, which indicates the Spirit as person. Being led by the Spirit signifies that Jesus is in total submission to the will of the Father.
3. He is empowered by God for his earthly ministry, which begins with his baptism, where the Holy Spirit alights on him.
4. He is the preeminent Son of God; he is the fulfillment of the long-awaited messianic expectations; he is empowered by God for his messianic ministry, which would shortly begin; and he would minister with God-given authority.

### Leading Jesus into the wilderness

After the legitimation of Jesus as God’s son, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit. All three of the Synoptic Gospels narrate this event as indicated in Table 2. While Mark uses the active voice (the Spirit led him out to the wilderness) and Luke the middle or passive voice ‘he was led by the Spirit’, Matthew uses the passive (Jesus was brought up to the wilderness by the Spirit). Similar to Mark, Matthew uses an article with ‘Spirit’, clearly indicating the Spirit as person. Being led by the Spirit signifies that Jesus is in total submission to the will of the Father. This submission of Jesus is a further testimony of his ‘fulfilment of all righteousness’ as demonstrated with his baptism (Mt 3:15).10

It seems that this conduct of the Spirit alludes to the exodus and wilderness experiences of Israel. Similar to when Jesus came out of the water and was led into the desert to be tested, God led Israel out of Egypt and through the waters into the desert (Dt 8:2, 5; cf. Floor 1969:35). God tested his ‘son Israel’ (cf. Ex 4:22–23) in the desert for 40 years to humble them after they emerged from the Red Sea (cf. Dt 6:10–19; 8:1–10; 1 Cor 10:1–18). In Jewish and Christian thought, the desert was regarded as the haunt of evil spirits (Lk 16:1; Mt 12:24 // Lk 11:24). During Israel’s testing, the Spirit of God was also particularly active (Nm 11:17, 25, 29; Neh 9:20; Ps 106:33; Is 63:10–14). While Israel’s history is largely one of failure, Jesus remains steadfast in his fidelity towards God.

It was a common part of Jewish tradition that persons chosen by God are tested as illustrated by the lives of Job (cf. Job 1–2) and Abraham (cf. Gn 22). In the same vein, Sirah 2:1 states: ‘My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself to be tested.’ Once persons have committed themselves, they are tested (Table 2: TOPICA). Three times the Satan tests Jesus’s obedience to God, hoping to entice Jesus to break his faith with God and thus to renounce his sonship. In testing Jesus, Satan deceitfully adopts God’s words, ‘Son of God’. In all three of these tests, the devil tempts Jesus to misuse his power. Jesus does not succumb to these temptations and the

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11. In a certain sense, Jesus had already been tempted by John the Baptist who tried to prevent Jesus from being baptised.

12. Matthew’s order of Jesus’s temptations reflects Israel’s experience in the wilderness as narrated in Exodus. Because of their hunger, Israel doubted God (Ex 16); they tested God (Ex 17) and they forsook God and succumbed to idolatry (Ex 32).

13. As Satan puts Jesus to the test three times, the religious leaders would also repeatedly put Jesus to the test. As Jesus had the last word with Satan so that he leaves, so Jesus had the last word with the religious leaders and they leave the scene (Mt 22:46–23:1). As Jesus will ultimately beat Satan in conflict, he beats the leaders in conflict.
devil leaves. Jesus’s authority eventually comes from God and not from the devil (Mt 18:18).

This short narrative once again demonstrates Jesus’s character traits. As Son of God, he is the supreme agent of God. Being chosen by God, he is willing to fulfil all righteousness. He subjects himself and is led out into the wilderness. He comes in conflict with Satan and overcomes the temptations set by the devil. He does not misuse his power. While remaining fully devoted to the Father when tempted, similar to what Israel experienced in the wilderness, he reverses Israel’s disobedience with his victorious dealings with the devil.

**Being upon Jesus**

Following Jesus’s healing of the man with the shrivelled hand on the Sabbath and the disgust of the Pharisees with this, Matthew 12:17 declares Jesus’s ministry as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 42:1–4 (Viljoen 2011:7). He does this in a ‘targumized’ manner as to provide a Christological interpretation of this Old Testament passage (Davies & Allison 2004b:328). Although this quotation is directly linked to Jesus withdrawing, this passage reveals the character of Jesus in a significant manner.

This quotation applies to Jesus’s character and ministry. The introduction to this quotation (Mt 12:15–16) is structurally reminiscent to Matthew 8:16–17, as both of these passages provide a summary of Jesus’s healing activity. Closely linked to this healing ministry in Matthew 12, this summary is followed by a quotation from Isaiah 42:1–4. This is the longest of all Old Testament quotations in Matthew, and is found in this gospel only. This formula quotation could have been taken from a pre-Matthean *testimonium* or could be Matthew’s independent translation of the Hebrew with some influence from the LXX and the Targum, which he adapted to fit the Christological context of the gospel (Davies & Allison 2004b:322; Luz 2007:192).

The quotation consists of five pairs that partly form parallelisms as indicated in Table 3. The quotation begins with God speaking in the first person (Mt 12:18a) and then immediately moves to statements about the ‘child’ (Mt 12:18b–21).

**TABLE 2: The Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness.**

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀνήλθε εἰς τὸν θάμνον ἐγρήγορον ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου</td>
<td>καὶ εὐθὺς τοῦ Γεννήματος ἠκούσατε ἐν ἑκάσταις εἰς τὰ γένιαν.</td>
<td>ἦν δὲ πλήρης Γεννήματος ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ κόσμου ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τούτῳ.</td>
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<td>καὶ ἤγετον ἐν τῇ Γεννήματος ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοσοφόρου ἐν τῷ διαβόλου</td>
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Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. At once, the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness 40 days, being tempted by Satan. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.

**TABLE 3: The Spirit upon Jesus.**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Matthew 12:18–21</th>
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<td>Ἰδοὺ ὁ παῖς μου ἐν ἑρεμίᾳ. ὁ ἀγαπητός μου ὃν ἐν εὐδοκίᾳ ἐφανερώθη ὑπὸ τὸν Διαβόλον, καὶ ἤγετον ἐν τῇ Γεννήματος ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοσοφόρου ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου.</td>
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The words of God, Ἰδοὺ ὁ παῖς μου ἐν ἑρεμίᾳ, ὁ ἀγαπητός μου ὃν ἐν εὐδοκίᾳ ἐφανερώθη [Behold, here is my Son whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom my soul delights; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. And in his name the nations will put their hope.’

Significantly, Matthew renders the Hebrew ‘*ebod*’ not with ‘*dōulos*’ [slave] or ‘*diakono*’ [servant], but with ‘*paiz*’ [son], similar to the LXX. The Father expressly identifies Jesus as his Son (Chamblin 2010:653).

**TABLE 4: The Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness.**

**TABLE 5: The Spirit upon Jesus.**

<table>
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The Spirit has been put on him. Matthew replaces ‘*ēdōkai*’ of the LXX Isaiah 42:1 with ‘*θερό*’. Being endowed by the Spirit, Jesus acts as a patient, peaceful, kind and loving Messiah. The quotation explains Jesus’s conduct: κρίνων τοῖς ἐθνοῖς [21]
Concluding Remarks

The Holy Spirit is a witness to the preeminent and unique character of Jesus. Jesus is born of the Spirit with no involvement of a human father. He became ‘God with us’.

The foremost position of Jesus is based on his unique relationship with God. With the baptism of Jesus, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove to underscore God’s voice from heaven, which is identifying Jesus as his beloved Son. The Holy Spirit confirms that God identifies, characterises and authorises Jesus in relation to himself.

The Holy Spirit witnesses to the fact that Jesus is commissioned by God. Jesus is endowed by the Spirit to perform his mission as the long-awaited Messiah. This is confirmed with the visible appearance of the Holy Spirit after Jesus’s baptism. The Spirit bears witness to the legitimate status and worthiness of Jesus as the eschatological bearer of God’s Spirit. Jesus’s status is once again confirmed in the scriptural quotation from Isaiah, stating his endowment with the Spirit. He is identified as the Messiah, because God’s Spirit rests upon him for this special task of bringing deliverance.

In its interaction with Jesus, the Holy Spirit demonstrates how Jesus submits to the will of God. Jesus fulfils all righteousness by allowing the Holy Spirit to lead him into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He remains faithful to his Father despite the repetitive and deceitful temptation by Satan. He reverses Israel’s disobedience with his victorious dealings with the devil.

As the Holy Spirit leads Jesus to the abode of the devil to be tempted, he demonstrates how Jesus overcomes the deceitfulness of Satan even in his human and vulnerable state after fasting for 40 days and nights. By remaining loyal to God, Jesus reverses Israel’s failure when they were tempted in the desert. Jesus has the last word with Satan so that he leaves. He will ultimately beat Satan and all opposing characters.

The Holy Spirit witnesses to the gentle and consoling way in which Jesus handles the weak and lowly, figuratively referred to as the bruised reeds and smouldering wicks. His conduct is different from the belligerent Messiah as popularly expected. Being endowed by the Spirit, Jesus does not cry out, but acts as the patient, peaceful, kind and loving Messiah. He has compassion with all, especially the weak and vulnerable – people on the edge of society.

The Holy Spirit witnesses that Jesus will bring hope to all the nations. In contrast to the common exclusivity of Jews, he offers Gentiles an open door. He shows mercy to all peoples.

While heralding the good news, he would bring judgement to ensure the victory of justice.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer
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