In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi
ISSN: (Online) 2305-0853, (Print) 1018-6441

Specific descriptions in the Gospel of Matthew: How they refine, enlarge, and direct the biblical text

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Dates:
Received: 28 July 2025
Accepted: 09 Jan. 2026
Published: 27 Feb. 2026

How to cite this article:
Branch, R.G., 2026, 'Specific descriptions in the Gospel of Matthew: How they refine, enlarge, and direct the biblical text', *In die Skriflig* 60(3), a3232. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v60i3.3232

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This article examines the Gospel of Matthew in a broad sense through its specific descriptions of people, places, and ideas. Such descriptions take various forms, including nicknames, endearments, monikers, appositives, slang terms, epithets, and insults, and they appear across both Testaments. Like verbs in their succinctness and brevity, specific descriptions sharpen a text's prose and direct its interpretation. From 'You are the light of the world' (Mt 5:14), to 'you hypocrites!' (Mt 23:13), to 'my betrayer' (Mt 26:45), specific descriptions such as these praise, identify, and specify within the Gospel of Matthew. Employing a literary methodology, this article draws on canonical references in its exploration of specific descriptions as a subset of onomastics, the history and study of names. Metaphors, similes, and phrases introduced by a pronoun such as *who* assist in identifying specific descriptions. The Gospel writer deftly employs these devices to sharpen characterisation and stress major themes, for example the presentation of Jesus as the King of the Jews (Mt 27:37). This article approaches specific descriptions in a broad sense, encompassing character traits, insults, locations, and self-designations. It includes insights from sociolinguistics, which explores the relationship between society and language.

Contribution: This article presents specific descriptions as a new lens not only for enjoying the Bible but also for discerning its subtle and terse nuances. It focuses on the Gospel of Matthew and integrates canonical principles, literary terminology, and selected insights from onomastics and sociolinguistics. It uses literary tools like tone, character, and diction. This article demonstrates that the literary categories of simile (a comparison often introduced by the words *like* or *as*) and metaphor (a figure of speech that implicitly compares two unrelated things) broadly apply to specific descriptions like endearments, locations, insults, and nicknames.

Keywords: specific descriptions; nicknames; names; New Testament; Gospel of Matthew; literary tools; onomastics; sociolinguistics; new lens.

Introduction[1]

This article on specific descriptions in the Gospel of Matthew employs a canonical framework and utilises literary tools such as character, tone, conflict, plot, setting, diction, time, and point of view. It shows that specific descriptions serve as a lens for reading, studying, and enjoying the Bible. The article also draws on selected insights from other disciplines, notably the relatively new scientific field of onomastics (the study of names), and sociolinguistics, defined as 'the study of the relation between language and society' (Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, University at Buffalo). The Gospel of Matthew reveals the refined education of its writer, a master of the art of praise (see Neyrey 1998:3–4).

This article approaches specific descriptions in a broad manner. It offers a working definition and incorporates insights related to names. Although the primary focus is the Gospel of Matthew, this article includes selected examples and categories of specific descriptions from both Testaments. The Bible contains approximately 4 000 personal and geographical names (Krasovec 2022:841).

The Gospel of Matthew is often referred to as the Gospel of the King (Erdman 1948:11; Wright 2016:219) and it merits this title. Matthew opens his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus,

1.The author wishes to thank the anonymous peer reviewers and editors who gave valued comments and suggestions on this article through multiple interactions.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the collection titled 'Francois P. Viljoen Festschrift', under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Albert Johannes Coetsee.

identifying him as the Messiah, the son of David, and the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1). David was regarded as both a beloved and great king of Israel, while Abraham was Israel's foremost patriarch. Matthew clearly believed this opening verse (see Burnett 2019:445); his Gospel's remaining verses evidence its veracity.

Matthew's Gospel records this proclamation – a criminal charge – nailed to the cross of execution: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews' (Mt 27:37). Son of David and King of the Jews are two titles that recur within the Matthean text. Their inclusion, combining kingly lineage with the mockery of rightful kingship, functions as a literary means alerting the reader to interpret the intervening chapters within the context of kingship. The sign nailed to the cross may have been understood by onlookers as a declaration of Rome's dominion over the world and as a warning to all would-be usurpers of their likely fate. However, Matthew and the other gospels presents this moment not as an end but as a beginning. They proclaim something new and previously unimaginable: 'In Jesus, the living God has become king of the whole world' (Wright 2016:276).

In addition to kingship, Matthew's other themes and distinctive features include the following:

- The uniqueness of the Gospel's opening two chapters, several distinctive parables, and narratives in which the disciple Peter figures prominently (Powell 2023:1741).
- The importance of forgiveness (Nel 2015).
- A distinctive Jewish emphasis (ed. Harrington 1991:1).
- A definitive answer to the question, 'Who is Jesus Christ?' (Hare 1993:5).
- The use of the term 'church' (*ekklesia*) and an anticipation of the future (Holladay 2017:191–192).
- How the Messiah brings one period of history to a close and introduces a new period of fulfilment (Meier 1980:5).
- A recognition of the scholarly debate concerning whether the gospel's writer was Jewish or Gentile; scholars point to both the importance of the opening genealogy and the subsequent hostility towards Jewish leaders (see Murphy 2005:139).
- A Mediterranean cultural perspective that emphasises the following (see Malina & Neyrey 1988:xvi–xvii):
  - A group orientation, with adults situated within patron–client relationships.
  - Material and emotional support provided by friends.
  - An emphasis on duty and loyalty.
  - Respect for hierarchy, seniority, and family.

This article, while drawing attention to specific descriptions as a new lens – a new conceptual tool through which to read, study, and enjoy the Gospel of Matthew – also touches briefly on similar specific descriptions and categories elsewhere in both the New and Old Testaments.

Indeed, specific descriptions may represent an overlooked inclusion. For example, the specific descriptions found in Matthew 1:1 offer a surprising possibility when read in relation to Revelation.

This article approaches specific descriptions in Matthew broadly by, including self-designations, insults, terms of respect, and locations. It also acknowledges the presence of specific descriptions in the ancient world.

The categorical order follows the chapter sequence of Matthew. The article uses English translations of the biblical text, primarily the KJV, NKJV, NIV, and NRSV. The author recognises that these categories reflect translation choices. It should be noted that specific descriptions, such as names and labels, enhance the comprehension of individual texts and align with the Bible's overall philosophy (see Blumenthal 2009:127–128).

This article builds on papers on nicknames presented in 2023 at the Society of Biblical Literature International meeting in Pretoria, South Africa, and at the Biblical Archaeology Society meeting in San Antonio, Texas (Branch 2023). Names and specific descriptions are important, for they express human identity, reveal emotion, indicate paradigms, and give direction to biblical texts; put differently, 'they give the essence of things' (see Krasovec 2022:860). Indeed, in the Gospel of Matthew, people are continually labelled (Malina & Neyrey 1988:35).

Research methods and design

This article combines the concepts of canonical criticism developed by Childs (1974) with standard literary tools. It accepts the canon as it now stands and adopts the following additional points from Childs (Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard 2004:59, 61). The Bible is characterised by its:

- Unity and distinctiveness.
- Profound theological emphasis.
- Status as the authoritative writings of the Jewish (Hebrew Bible) and Christian (Hebrew Bible and New Testament) communities.

Standard literary tools include point of view, character, plot, and style (Russaw 2020:374–375). A discerning scholar also attends to setting, time, tone, scholarly tradition, and historical context. Biblical narrative criticism, a subset of literary criticism, further identifies features such as foreshadowing, symbolism, metaphors, similes, types of speech, themes, and motifs (Klein et al. 2004:65).

This article recognises the importance of all these literary tools (see Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:1–60) and emphasises one tool in particular, one variously described as language, diction, and word choice. Sociolinguistics highlights the social context of speech (Fishman 1972:xi), and specific descriptions, often used as oft-spoken monikers, clearly illustrate this dimension. Indeed, specific descriptions – frequently understood as nicknames – function as key elements, images, or variables within a passage (see Gorman 2009:106).

Specific descriptions span and connect both Testaments. For instance, God addresses Ezekiel, a prophet, as son of man (Ezk 2:1), while Jesus, also recognised as a prophet, prefers Son of Man as a self-designation (Mt 12:8; Mk 2:10; Lk 24:19). The designation highlights the humanity of each figure and may be viewed broadly as an additional name; over the centuries, it came to be regarded as a title. Translators indicate the difference between humanity and deity through capitalisation.

Specific descriptions understood as names form a subfield within the broader category of onomastics – the study of the origin and history of given names. Names of people and places reveal 'identity, social emotions, aesthetic ingenuity, and strategic communicative paradigms' (Krasovec 2022:860). Literary tools such as setting, time, family history, and narrative detail clearly assist in explaining how a person or place received a specific description like a moniker (see Matfunjwa, Mlambo & Skosana 2024).

Specific descriptions shed light on the social, cultural, and situational areas of the societies in which they occur (see Matfunjwa et al. 2024). Put differently, specific descriptions provide societal nuances reflecting status, authority, success, stigma, and privilege; they mirror existing social structures within particular social settings (see Matfunjwa et al. 2024). An example regarding the latter is Jerusalem; it comes to be known by the affectionate designation Daughter of Zion (Mt 21:5). Sociolinguistics examines the interaction between language, its varieties, specifically its functions, and its speakers (Fishman 1972:4).

In a modern context, language use and accent often signal social preference and identity (see Kinzler & DeJesus 2013:655, 662). Mensah (2023:62) notes the importance of recognising the 'socially relevant qualities of names in the context where they are given and used'. Although his focus is Nigeria, his insight is equally applicable to the biblical text.

One challenge biblical scholars face when studying the biblical text is the absence of direct personal interaction between the researcher and the biblical characters. Scholars address this limitation through sound methods of exegesis (seeking a text's meaning by using literary, historical, and cultural tools) and hermeneutics (applying exegetical findings in an interpretation that accurately and faithfully reflects the text's meaning). The goal is straightforward: to get the plain, original meaning of the text (Fee & Stuart 2003:17–18, 23). Scholars like Fee and Stuart (2003:21) further acknowledge the eternal relevance of God's Word, affirming that it speaks to all humanity across cultures and generations. Van der Merwe (2015a) articulates the far-reaching goal of sound biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, namely that the principles embedded in a text become a way of life.

A general rule applies here: whether name, nickname, or specific description, a moniker is 'inextricably bound to that which is named' (Bohmbach 2000:945). Barnette (2024), a linguist and co-host of the National Public Radio programme 'A Way with Words', adds a human dimension to language and communication when she observes, 'We are metaphor-making animals'.

At times, however, names are absent, and a specific description, nickname, or function becomes the primary means by which a person or group is recognised. A possible example from the Old Testament is Ebedmelech, whose name means *Servant of the King*. A Cushite, he saved Jeremiah's life during the siege of Jerusalem (588–586 BCE) (Jr 38:7–13; Branch 2025).

Specific descriptions and nicknames in ancient history

Matthew's Gospel, although anonymous, is attributed to Matthew the tax collector, one of Jesus's first disciples (Mt 9:9; 10:3). It was written between 80 and 90 CE (Powell 2023:1737) or, in a broader sense, to 'the generation after 70 CE' (Boring & Craddock 2004:12). Scholars commonly refer to the work simply as Matthew.

Because the author of Matthew wrote after the destruction of the Temple, he was quite probably familiar with earlier Greek writers and Roman emperors. These figures were not only widely known but also were frequently associated with nicknames. Significantly, this demonstrates that the practice of using specific descriptions was already well established prior to the writing of the New Testament. Names illuminate both name-givers and name-receivers, as well as the generations in which they lived (see Kotilainen 2011:55). The following examples illustrate this point:

- **Socrates (470–399 BCE):** Known for his self-designation as a gadfly ('Plato: *The Apology of Socrates*', 30e). He is often credited as the Father of Western Philosophy (Carlisle et al. n.d.; Mark 2009).
- **Plato (428–347 BCE):** Known primarily by his nickname and renowned for both practical and theoretical philosophy. His given name was Aristocles. It is commonly thought that his wrestling coach bestowed the nickname *Plato*, meaning *broad*. Plato founded the Academy in Athens and was both a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2026).[2]
- **Aristotle (384–322 BCE):** Plato's famous pupil and widely regarded as the founder of formal logic. His work spanned scientific and philosophical endeavours; the phrase *Aristotelian concepts* is 'embedded in Western thinking' (Kenny 2025).[3]
- **Sophocles (496–406 BCE):** Greek dramatist and 'dubbed "the Bee" because of the sweetness of his words' ('Sophocles Plays'). He wrote approximately 125 plays, seven of which survived (Encyclopedia of World Biography 2026; Greek Mythology.com 2026).[4]

2.See *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/plato/#H1

3.See *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle

4.See *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, https://www.notablebiographies.com/Sc-St/Sophocles.html

- **Herodotus (484–420 BCE):** Known as the Father of History and author of 'the first great narrative history produced in the ancient world' (Abella et al. 2026b).[5]
- **Hesoid (flourished c. 700 BCE):** Known as the Father of Greek Didactic Poetry (Solmson 2026).[6]
- **Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE):** Roman general and political leader. Although he appears to have been known by both names and not by a nickname, the name *Caesar* became a title for subsequent Roman emperors. The month of July was named in his honour (Toynbee 2026).[7]
- **Caligula, Roman emperor (37–41 CE):** Known as Little Boot, a childhood nickname given to him by soldiers (Abella et al. 2026b).[8]
- **Nero, Roman emperor (54–68 CE):** Identified as the Antichrist in early Christian tradition (Abella et al. 2026c).[9]
- **Aulus Vitellius, Roman emperor (July–December 69 CE):** Remembered as a lazy glutton who, during his brief reign, 'caused the deaths of tens of thousands of Roman citizens'.[10]

Matthew adopts broad descriptions from earlier Hebrew Scriptures relating to both a city and a person. He adds the specificity of prophetic fulfilment by demonstrating that these descriptions now refer to Jerusalem (Zch 9:9 and Is 62:11 for Mt 21:5) and to Jesus (Ps 118:25–26 for Mt 21:9). These Matthean verses describe Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The city is identified as the Daughter of Zion; spontaneous cries of Hosanna to the Son of David erupt from those lining the streets. Furthermore, '[*t*]he title Son of David expresses the crowds' belief that Jesus is the eschatological Davidic Messiah' (Meier 1980:234).

Definitions

This article identifies and examines various word portraits in the Gospel of Matthew. The author of the Gospel, traditionally identified as the disciple Matthew, a tax collector (Mt 9:9), favoured a writing style rich in designations; these may be described as grammatical alternatives (see Burnett 2019:419). These portraits – these grammatical alternatives – include descriptions of people, places, and ideas.

A concise working definition of a broad category, such as *name*, and of its subset *nickname*, is a word or set of words by which a person, animal, place, or thing is known, addressed, or referred to. In a narrower sense, 'a nickname is no less than an attempt at instant biography' (Sifakis 1984:viii). In addition, a specific description or designation, such as a nickname, may display one or more of the following characteristics (see Bohmbach 2000:944–946):

- Express humour.
- Function as an endearment or a slur.
- Be assigned after birth.
- Be acquired as a result of a life event.
- Be changed or amended during a person's lifetime.
- Describe a physical characteristic or a personality trait.

The study of general descriptions in the Bible presents certain challenges. For example, a nickname – whether biblical or contemporary – does not conform to a fixed or rigid set of criteria; rather, it lends itself to a cognitive approach (see Darden & Robinson 1976). Such an approach may engage emotions, behaviour, and the ways in which the mind processes information. Significantly, the Bible itself rarely discusses emotions.

Onomastics, the historical and scholarly study of names, focuses mainly on personal names and began to receive broader recognition in the early 2000s (see Pilcher 2016:764). One clear subset within this field consists of specific descriptions such as nicknames. An even more defined subset – indeed, the focus of this article – is specific descriptions in the Gospel of Matthew.

Throughout the Bible, a name communicates something of the fundamental hopes of parents, the possible destiny of the recipient, and the community to which that person belongs (see Bohmbach 2000:944). Various specific descriptions, including appositives, monikers, and insults amplify these important markers.

Four broad ways to spot a specific description: New Testament examples

A text or passage provides clues that guide its interpretation. Four literary signals are especially relevant here: the words *as* and *like*, which designate similes; metaphors creating unexpected comparisons; and the pronoun *who*, which often introduces defining character traits. Phrases and names belong to two categories known as linguistic variants (see Lai, Racz & Roberts 2020):

> **As:** Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, be as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves (Mt 10:16).
>
> **Like:** The new Jerusalem shall descend like a bride adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). You are like whitewashed tombs (Mt 23:27).
>
> **Metaphors:** The devil: the father of lies (Jn 8:44); (John called the crowds coming to see him, 'you brood of vipers' [Mt 3:7; Lk 3;7]). Referring to John, Jesus asked the crowds if they came to see 'a reed shaken by the wind' (Mt 11:7).
>
> **Who:** 'To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ' (Jude 1). Jude's opening address assures his audience that they are not among the condemned or false teachers (see Perkins 1995:141).

Word descriptions as aspects of identity in the New Testament

- Occupation: Simon the Tanner (Ac 9:42).
- Unique designation: John the Baptist (Mt 3:1).

5.See *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herodotus-Greek-historian

6.See *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hesiod

7.See *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler

8.See *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caligula-Roman-emperor

9.See*Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor

10.See *The Collector*, https://www.thecollector.com/vitellius-gluttonous-roman-emperor-69-ce/

- Something significant about a person's life or birth: Thomas (called Didymus, a Greek word meaning Twin (see Morris 1985; Jn 11:16n, 1618).
- Barnabas: Son of Encouragement (Ac 4:36); his given name was Joseph (Branch 2007:297).
- The Way: An early designation for the emerging Christian faith (Ac 9:2; 18:25–26; 19:9, 23; see Gaventa 2006; Ac 9:2n:1871).

Erikson's (1963) age-appropriate model, *Stages of Psychological Development*, invites imaginative reflection when applied to the biblical text. For instance, Thomas may have been called Twin or Didymus as a toddler, and Simon may have followed an older adult as an apprentice tanner while still a youth (see Myers 2007:166). Over time, these designations endured. Language possesses a verbal repertoire (Fishman 1972:2), and specific designations – especially when understood broadly – constitute one of its vehicles.

In both Testaments, a new name or an original name may signal destiny. For example, the Lord renames Abram as Abraham: the former meaning *great* or *exalted father*, and the latter meaning *father of many nations* (Gn 12:1–3; 17:1–8). Likewise, the name *Jesus* means *Yahweh saves* (Mt 1:21). In both cases, the name itself carries prophetic fulfilment.

Broad word descriptions in specific categories in the Gospel of Matthew

From this point onward, the article identifies 14 specific categories of word descriptions in Matthew. Together, these sections offer an overview of the Gospel as a whole; their sequence follows the textual appearance of each category. A final, 15th category elaborates on three specific designations of Jesus.

Lineage and kingship: Matthew 1:1; 27:37

The Gospel of Matthew, often described as the Gospel of the King, opens with a genealogy including Jesus's royal heritage as the son of David and the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1). It concludes with the criminal charge affixed above his head on the cross: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews' (Mt 27:37). These paired Jewish references boldly, majestically, and forcefully proclaim Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the one who represents God's saving act for all peoples (Boring & Craddock 2004:13). The theme of kingship, introduced through Matthew's appositive *Son of David*, establishes a triumphant tone for this Gospel's account.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus introduces a new pattern: a king rejected by his own people; a ruler who comes as a servant; the first who assumes the last position; the one who is great yet appears lowly (see Malina & Neyrey 1988:117).

Shortly before the Gospel's conclusion, a sign intended as mockery is displayed. It reads, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews' (Mt 27:37). The inscription – far from small – was written in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, the languages of the political, cultural, and religious worlds of that time (Jn 19:20; Augsburger 1982:313).

The sign may have been meant as a cruel joke, yet it became profoundly true on a deeper level (see Boring & Craddock 2004:99). It came to function as a Christian confession of faith. Although the execution by crucifixion appears to bring Jesus's extraordinary life to an end, it does not. There is the resurrection in Chapter 28!

Animal names-Matthew 3:7; 7:15

Vipers: Matthew 3:7

John the Baptist became known as one who preached repentance, and many people flocked to him. The scribes and Pharisees also came to John. He described them as a *brood of vipers*. Malina and Neyrey (1988:19) view this as a distinguishing phrase that identifies them not only as rivals, but also as enemies – 'an altogether evil group possessed by Satan'.

The word *vipers* evokes the image of snakes fleeing from a field set on fire. The scribes and Pharisees were called to repent (see Augsburger 1982:43). The biblical record indicates that they did not.

The association of snakes with deception and sin was already established in Genesis (Coakely 2025:11). The scribes and Pharisees were labelled vipers because they did not believe John, did not repent, and stood ready to reject and destroy the Christ whose coming John proclaimed (Erdman 1948:34).

John's public assessment of public leaders – remarkable in its courage! – led to his imprisonment and ultimately cost him his life (Mt 14:1–12). This confrontation appears to set in place the leaders' opposition to Jesus as king (see Boring & Craddock 2004:20).

Ravenous wolves: Matthew 7:15

Jeremiah and Ezekiel both spoke out against false prophets (Jr 6:14; Ezk 22:28). The specific designation ravenous wolves, used by Jesus as a warning to his hearers (Mt 7:15), highlights a false prophet's danger, scope, and influence (Augsburger 1982:101).

Matthew understands false prophets as those who mislead the people (Boring & Craddock 2004:41). They appear innocent, arriving in harmless guise, behaving non-violently like sheep, and seemingly speaking the right words. Yet they are false prophets capable of causing great harm; in reality, they are wolves intent on destruction. Matthew's objection is that they fail to produce Christian 'fruit' – that is, they do not display the fruits of conversion (see Boring & Craddock 2004:41).

Names for a supernatural being: Matthew 4:1–11; 6:13

Matthew 4:1–11 presents three names for a single supernatural being. The narrator provides two – devil and tempter (vv. 1, 5) – and again uses tempter in verse 3. The setting is Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, a period of material deprivation for him (Robertson 1980:85).

These narrative designations reveal traits of Satan's character, including deviousness, beguiling lies, and faulty theology, which Jesus corrects. Significantly, Satan operates 'within the context of God's permissive will' (Gibson 2000:1170). The term *tempter* may also evoke Israel's wilderness experience, which involved idolatry (Hare 1993:24–25). Harrington (ed. 1991:66) argues that *tester* is a more appropriate term than *tempter* in Matthew 4:3 because '"testing" refers to the process by which the covenant partner is scrutinized to determine his fidelity'.

Jesus provides a third name, a noun of direct address, in Matthew 4:10: 'Away with you, Satan!' This confrontation reveals Jesus's purity of heart and focus: he will serve and worship God alone (Hare 1993:26).

Soon afterwards, Jesus expands the concept of a supernatural adversary by introducing another name, the evil one (Mt 6:13), within what is known as the Lord's Prayer. This prayer, addressed to 'our Father in heaven', concludes with a plea for deliverance and protection from this evil power and the temptation it exerts (Erickson 2025). Krasovec (2022:860) notes that when names are applied to God, they function as 'abstract designations of God's nature and properties'. This beloved prayer affirms that God's power far exceeds that of the evil one.

In summary, false prophets stand in opposition to God's law, are dangerous, and must be avoided. True prophets, by contrast, are rare (Augsburger 1982:101).

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5–7

The Beatitudes of Jesus announce unexpected blessings on the poor, the mourning, and the hungry (Mt 5:3–6). They promise eschatological reward to the virtuous and offer hope of reversal to those in unfortunate circumstances (see Carter 2000:158–159). Jesus's pedagogy employs a range of literary forms, including metaphors (Stein 1996:124–125). The Beatitudes are as revelatory as the giving of the law to Moses (Powell 2023; Mt 5:1–7:29n, 178).

Jesus's teaching includes specific designations. He gives the following three to his disciples and to those gathered below on the hillside who came to hear him teach. They function as clear 'explicit parallels and contrasts' (see Alter 1981:5). Matthew 5: 13-14 mentions metaphors:

- You are the salt of the earth.
- You are the light of the world.
- A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

These metaphors not only create word pictures but also serve as models for discipleship (see White 2010:209).

Jesus taught within a daily context marked by heavy taxation, Jewish resentment, and Roman occupation. Yet he taught this listeners to see themselves differently. He offered an authoritative and faithful interpretation of the law (Viljoen 2013). He blessed the people by identifying them as essential (salt), universally present (light), and a place of refuge (a city on a hill). Within these metaphorical descriptions, he challenged his audience to become blessed, joyful peacemakers (Mt 5:9; see Brueggemann 2004:241).

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, a blessing does more than convey divine goodwill and grace; it is received gladly and humbly because the one who pronounces it is recognised as standing close to God (ed. Richardson 1950:33).

Roberts and Wilson (2018) offer succinct praise for metaphors that applies across both Testaments. They write:

> [*M*]etaphors have great power to fashion the way we conceptualise things, even when we don't notice they are doing it. If a controlling metaphor is chosen well, it has the capacity to illuminate new worlds of meaning and help us see all sorts of connections we might otherwise have missed. (p. 23)

The Beatitudes are well known throughout literature and history. Brooks (2025), a *New York Times* columnist, refers to three – the meek, the poor in spirit, and the merciful – in a recent column.

He observes that 'billions of people have dedicated their lives to these abstractions'. Brooks's column challenges President Donald Trump, who had posted a public message on Truth Social using the word *scum*. Trump wrote, 'Happy Memorial Day to all, including the scum that spent the last four years trying to destroy our country'.

Brooks (2025), noting that the President's context of using the word *scum* represents 'dehumanization', states, 'Somebody should remind Trump that you don't love your country if you hate half its members'.

Specific descriptions for Jewish rulers: Matthew 6:2

Jesus openly engaged with lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew. At times, he used specific descriptions to characterise them. Overall, these characterisations were direct, summative, derogatory, and public.

Jesus referred to these groups as hypocrites at least 14 times in Matthew (Mt 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 16:3; 22:18; 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51). It appears to be Jesus's preferred nickname for his learned opponents. Hare (1993:268) describes the term as 'pejorative'. Brueggemann (2002:190), while acknowledging the frequent reference to these two groups, recognises them as 'pivotal figures in ongoing Jewish interpretation'.

Although both Testaments are known for 'an extraordinary prominence of verbatim repetition', the use of *hypocrites* for these groups is particularly striking (see Alter 1981:88–91). Jesus expands on their hypocrisy by describing the scribes and Pharisees as whitewashed tombs (Mt 23:27) and as blind guides leading the blind (Mt 15:14). Their polished outward appearance concealed their fundamental failing: inner hypocrisy (Malina & Neyrey 1988:26). The practice of whitewashing tombs before Passover was a custom that served as a warning against contact with the unclean bones of the dead (Powell 2023; Mt 23:27n, 1778). Such descriptions communicate shame; as monikers, they signal a loss of respect and identify those to be avoided (see Neyrey 1998:30).

Significantly, Matthew records little public response from those labelled as *hypocrites*, *whitewashed tombs*, and *blind guides*. He does, however, report their private plotting to kill Jesus (Mt 26:1–3). As Sifakis (1984:ix) observes, 'sobriquets … sum up all the physical and moral characteristics of an individual and sometimes of a party'. Throughout the gospels, Jesus articulates a higher ethical vision for his followers – one that emphasises peace, justice, health, the common good, and hope (Van Eck 2013:13). However, he is also a master of insults (Pilch 2014).

Specific descriptions clearly include insults. When directed publicly at contemporary leaders, such language may be experienced by the receivers as unnecessary rudeness and humiliation; however, it may be received by a wider audience as truth-telling. For instance, Jesus uses the general designation *hypocrites* for those who pray loudly for display, fast with sombre faces, and judge others while failing to judge themselves (Mt 6:5, 16; 7:5). In relation to insults, Van der Merwe's (2015b) insight is instructive: the contemporary meaning of a passage is not an addition to a basic literal meaning; it is intrinsic to the text's meaning.

In other words, all participants recognise an insult as such.

The term *hypocrites* is also widely recognised as a general insult applied to two specific groups who came to hear Jesus: the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus reprimands them for failing to practise what they instruct others to do (Mt 23:1–2). In Matthew 23, he details their hypocrisy. They:

- Prevent others from entering the kingdom of heaven (v. 13).
- Make new converts miserable (v. 15).
- Tithe spices while neglecting the law's weightier matters (v. 23).
- Practise greed and self-indulgence (v. 25).
- Appear whitewashed and respectable outwardly while being inwardly full of uncleanness (v. 27).
- Are descendants of those who murdered the prophets (v. 29).

Specific descriptions as sharp characterisations: Matthew 7:15

Jesus warned the crowds during the Sermon on the Mount about false prophets. They deceive by appearing gentle and coming in sheep's clothing, yet they are dangerous. Therefore, they must be examined carefully. Jesus advised that they can be recognised by their fruits – that is, by their words and actions. He likened false prophets to ravenous wolves (Mt 7:15) and described the crowds themselves as sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36).

Sheep are traditionally portrayed in Scripture as unable to survive on their own in the wilderness, dependent on a shepherd for food and protection, and characterised by innocence; they are sacrificial animals (Coakely 2025:32). When Jesus speaks of sheep, he does so as he surveys those whom he teaches. He perceives their distress, lack of organisation, and ignorance. Although his words offer a truthful assessment, they arise from a heart of compassion and are spoken in love (Mt 9:35–38).

Characterisations such as these contain 'verbal clues' that connect both Testaments (Alter 1981:10). Modern research has shown that power, social status, dominance, and literacy may be discerned through various forms of literary analysis, including support verb analysis (see Özbay 2020:38–39).

In addition, names and appositives provide verbal clues regarding relationships. For instance, Matthew understands the title *Son of God* and its associated imagery as 'primarily relational', indicating that Jesus is 'fully faithful and obedient to the will of God' and one who is 'called out of Egypt' (Mt 2:15; Johnson 2010:172).

Specific descriptions as three signs of respect: Jesus's use of son and daughter and woman: Matthew 9:2, 22; 15:28

Taken in a broad sense, addressing someone as son, daughter, or woman signals respect (Mt 9:2, 22; 15:28) and expresses Jesus's regard for specific, unnamed individuals whom he encounters and blesses.

By contrast, the scribes and Pharisees openly disrespect Jesus. In Luke 15:1, they speak loudly enough for him to hear: 'This fellow eats with tax collectors and sinners'. They clearly knew Jesus's name, having come to hear him, yet they deliberately deny him normal courtesy and human dignity by using a dismissive appositive. In doing so, they may also be hinting at Jesus's perceived lower social status. Sociolinguistic research shows that speakers who differ in social class, ethnicity, age, or group identity also differ in patterns of speech (Facchinetti, Krug, Palmer 2012).

Matthew 9:2

The setting is once again public. Jesus is evidently in the presence of scribes. A paralysed man arrives on a mat, carried by others. The group appears to come intentionally to Jesus, and Jesus recognises their faith.

Jesus immediately addresses the paralytic: 'Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven' (9:2). After responding to the unspoken heart-questionings of some of the scribes, Jesus

grants an additional gift of healing by commanding, 'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home' (v. 6). Jesus uses the uniqueness of the paralytic's healing to demonstrate his authority on earth to forgive sins (see Erdman 1948:72). Indeed, the Kingdom of God is breaking into time (Augsburger 1982:121). This glorious miracle displays both the faith of others and the compassion of Jesus.

Matthew 9:22

'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well'. The healing of the woman with the flow of blood occurs as an interruption within the larger narrative of the raising of Jairus's daughter, the child of a synagogue ruler (see Mt 9:18–26, especially vv. 20–22). The woman's ongoing bleeding rendered her ritually unclean and socially excluded – indeed, doubly marginalised (Levine 1992:257). Her healing by Jesus restored her to community life and made marriage and family life possible. By addressing her as daughter, Jesus graciously and publicly designated her as part of his new family (see Branch 2013:7–8). Matthew highlights the efficacy of Jesus's words (Murphy 2005:151). Jesus affirms both her action and her faith, and his public recognition likely enhanced her sense of self-worth and social standing (see Mensah, Yta & Solomon-Etefia 2025).

Matthew 15:24

A Canaanite woman addresses Jesus as Lord and Son of David. Jesus initially ignores her. She persists, loudly voicing a petitionary appeal reminiscent of the psalms (see Hahn 1969:255). She beseeches him for the healing of her daughter, who is 'tormented by a demon' (v. 22). Her persistence and her recognition of Jesus as Messiah – expressed through the nickname, term or title, Son of David, appear to lead to the granting of her request.

Indeed, Jesus seems to engage appreciatively in the exchange. He acknowledges her messianic designation and graciously commends her, a Canaanite, saying, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish', and her daughter is healed instantly (v. 28). This story demonstrates that faith in Jesus, rather than ethnicity, becomes the new dividing line (see Viljoen 2007:698).

One characteristic the Bible shares with other literature is that it does not specifically define a word like *courage* (Bressler 1999:11). Instead, it presents a definition through example. In this story, the Canaanite woman displays not only desperation but also extraordinary boldness. While some argue that gender is always sexualised (see Mensah 2023:61), this biblical account shows how Jesus honours a woman – desperate for her daughter's life – and sends her home with a story to tell.

Specific descriptions for an individual or group: Matthew 10:1

Monikers designate both groups and individuals. The disciples are known as the Twelve, and Jesus is addressed as Teacher (Mt 10:1–15; 12:38). Jesus consistently uses encounters as what would today be called teaching moments. For example, during the scene of betrayal and arrest, Judas addresses Jesus as *Rabbi*, and Jesus responds by greeting him as *Friend* (Mt 26:50). Even in this moment, Jesus remains – as always – 'calm, in control, and ever the teacher' (Murphy 2005:171). Rabbi is an honorific title used for teachers (Johnson 2010:176).

The Twelve are entrusted with a charge, a task, and the scope of their mission. At this stage, Jesus and the Twelve operate within the same geographical boundaries; neither is to go to the Gentiles nor to the Samaritans (Erdman 1948:51). As itinerant preachers, they will find food and lodging, encounter persecution and imprisonment, and come to realise that the destiny of nations hinges on how others respond to them (Ladd 1987:206).

In another vignette, the scribes and Pharisees approach Jesus with what appears to be a compliment; they address him as *Teacher* (Mt 12:38). Their request, however, conceals an insult: they demand a sign. Aware that they do not truly believe in him, Jesus responds by declaring that an adulterous generation seeks a sign (Mt 12:38–39). In doing so, Jesus deftly, decisively, and immediately returns the insult. The metaphor adulterous generation 'is used to describe infidelity with respect to God' (ed. Harrington 1991:188).

Jesus changes Simon's name: Matthew 10:2

Jesus introduced new names both for himself and for Simon. Upon first meeting Simon, Jesus renamed him Cephas or Peter (Jn 1:42); this designation quickly became his established name (Mk 3:16; Mt 10:2). In lists of the disciples, Peter always leads, and he is the most prominent disciple in the Gospel of Matthew (Duling 2006; Mt 10:2n, 1684). Two other disciples, James and John, were known not only as the sons of Zebedee but also as Boanerges – the sons of thunder (Mk 3:17). Significantly, Jesus also bestowed this new name on them.

Throughout Jesus's ministry, the three figures most frequently associated with him were Peter and the brothers James and John (Mt 17:1; Mk 5:37). This group is often described as 'the inner ring' (Winter 1995:533). Jesus's authority to assign new names to these men underscores the leadership relationship he exercised among the disciples and illustrates how that relationship was, in part, defined by language (see Fishman 1972:46). Modern research further indicates that nicknames are more commonly used among men than among women (Skipper, Leslie & Wilson 1990:210).

Specific descriptions as insults: Matthew 11:19

Jesus had heard that he was being called a glutton, a wine drinker, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners

(Mt 11:19). Acknowledging these derogatory labels, Jesus taught his hearers – and subsequent followers – how to address an insult openly. Barclay (1958:11) rightly observes that such labels often reveal the speakers' own prejudices and perversities.

Commentators appear to say relatively little about Jesus being labelled as a drunkard, a glutton, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet these gibes clearly signal rejection and represent unjust condemnation (see Meier 1980:124). At the same time, such insults can be analytically useful, as they help readers 'make meaning from the text' (Bressler 1999:6).

These insults expose the opposition's strong dislike toward Jesus. His response – 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' (Mt 11:19b) – demonstrates how deftly and quickly he responds and turns the accusation back on his critics. In effect, Jesus exposes their folly, a pointed insult, especially as they prided themselves on their knowledge and their holy living.

However, the opposition's description of Jesus is revealing. Jesus enjoyed social gatherings – to use a colloquial expression, he liked to party. He attended banquets and took pleasure in companionship. He participated graciously in conversations, likely honouring his hosts by enjoying their wine and having second helpings. He engaged freely with other guests, especially those shunned by the wider community because of professions such as tax collecting. Jesus showed this engaging quality: he was deeply engaged with people around him.

Nicknames used as insults or derogatory terms also appear in contemporary contexts. Two examples illustrate this. Firstly, in the television series, *All in the family*, Rob Reiner played Michael Stivic. His character's father-in-law, Archie Bunker (played by Carroll O'Connor), repeatedly dubbed him Meathead (see Zuckerman 2025). Secondly, according to Chris Craft, Judge, Shelby County Criminal Court, Division VIII, nicknames are common in court proceedings in Memphis. Gang members, he notes, often know one another only by their street names rather than by their given names. 'They call them skreet names', Craft explained, spelling the term out. When asked for a memorable skreet name, he smiled and replied, Tub-of-Lard (Craft 2025).

Jesus refocuses family relationships: Matthew 12:46–50

In this passage, Jesus acknowledges blood relationships, yet he introduces an additional dimension of belonging for those he calls family. He sends them – together with his disciples – into the world as 'custodians of the Kingdom' (Ladd 1987:118). In doing so, Jesus disrupts the traditional tribal understanding of family and instead emphasises obedience to God's will as the defining criterion for inclusion (Grayston 1950:77).

When informed that his mother and brothers wish to see him, Jesus gestures towards those gathered around him and asks, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' He then looks at those seated about him and declares, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and mother'. Through this extended description, Jesus expands the concept of family to include not only biological kin but also those who do the will of God. Significantly, it is this latter group that comes to be identified as the 'true family' (Hare 1993:145).

Self-description as pet dog: Matthew 15:21–28

Perhaps in every culture, the way one says *dog* – and the particular words used for *dogs* – signals either insult or affectionate familiarity. Jesus and the Canaanite woman engage in such an exchange as noted earlier.

Jesus appears to enjoy the exchange (Mt 15:21–28). The term *dog* was evidently a common Jewish insult applied to outsiders such as Gentiles and infidels; it referred to street scavengers that were lean, savage, and often diseased (Barclay 1958:134). In short, they were considered unclean (Taylor 2000:352).

As mentioned, the setting is an open area in the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus, addressing him as Son of David, a messianic title that signals recognition and faith, and pleads for healing because her daughter is tormented by a demon. Her appeal is loud, public, and desperate.

Jesus initially ignores her. Undeterred and now beyond humiliation, she persists. Jesus responds that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15:21–24). The woman then kneels before him – an unmistakable sign of helplessness, urgent need, and worship.

She replies that even the *pet dogs* – *kunaria*, a term that implicitly includes herself – receive the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Her love for her daughter is so profound that she is unafraid to present herself as desperate, persistent, and obnoxious.

Jesus grants her request, blessing her not only through acknowledgement but also with kindness. In doing so, he offers a public example to all present: he engages respectfully with a Canaanite, a foreign woman, one who by tradition was despised.

Names and doubling: Matthew 23:37

An appositive for Jerusalem in Psalm 48, the city of the great King (v. 2), also functions as a prophecy. Yet the great King's reign has not fully come to pass. Indeed, Jesus lamented over the city and delivered what may be Scripture's saddest, most truthful, and most poignant assessment. Through a metaphor and a simile, Jesus describes both Jerusalem's actions and his own longing to embrace the city in love:

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Mt 23:37)

Barclay (1958:330) hears in Jesus's words 'the poignant tragedy of rejected love'. They acknowledge the pain Jesus must have experienced, while also showing that he accepted the rejection of the city's leaders and people.

Jesus's repetition, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem', highlights the literary principle of repetition, namely that the recurrence of a key word or phrase offers insight into both the 'structure of the text' and its 'central concern' (Gorman 2009:91). Alter (1981:88) likewise underscores the importance of repetition, particularly in the Hebrew Bible. Here, Jesus's words function as a 'prophetic challenge' addressed to both the crowds and the disciples, revealing him as transcendent Wisdom (see Boring & Craddock 2004:91).

Specific descriptions as locators: Matthew 28:1

New names can also specify locations. When Matthew attaches a place to a person's name, it serves to distinguish that person from others with the same or a similar name. In this way, a name combined with a location illuminates 'a person's time and place in some way' (Sifakis 1984:x).

Mary Magdalene is identified both by name and by location (Mt 28:1), as well as by her deliverance from seven demons (Lk 8:2). These references remain silent regarding a husband, brothers, or sons, which may suggest that she exercised control over her own property and finances (Gaventa 2000:864). Luke 8:3 mentions women who supported Jesus 'out of their own means'. Mary Magdalene may well have been among them. She, together with the woman identified as the 'other Mary', form what Harrington (ed. 1991:408) describes as 'the principles of continuity throughout the passion'.

Jesus is also designated as the Nazarene (Mt 2:23; 26:71). This designation should be heard and read as an intended insult. The association with Nazareth undercuts any assumption that Jesus was a prince in disguise (see Flusser 1969:14).

This term of reproach and scorn nevertheless fulfils what the prophets foretold; the Messiah would bear human contempt before fulfilling the prophecies of glory as the universal King (Erdman 1948:32). Augsburger (1982:40) adds this geographical insight: Nazareth lay along major trade routes; in many respects, the world came to Nazareth.

Yet another possibility invites consideration. In Hebrew, the consonants *NZR* can mean *Branch* and may point to a messianic designation. Indeed, the coming Davidic ruler – the promised king, the Branch – will be God's servant (Towner 2023; Zch 3:8n, 1300).

Three Matthew designations that came to be seen as titles

Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus refocused both family and worship around himself. These are startling claims that reoriented society – and they are true only if he is the Messiah.

Jesus identified himself as the Lord of the Sabbath. Over time, this self-designation came to be recognised as a title indicating a divine nature (Mt 12:1–8; Mk 2:23–28; Lk 6:1–5). Jesus thus presented himself as the proper focus of worship and as the one who possesses authority over the Sabbath (see Murphy 2005:30). In effect, this is a remarkable self-name – and blasphemous if untrue.

A Greek term for pronouncement stories is *chreia* – short narratives that preserve brief words or deeds of a particular figure (Murphy 2005:29–30). Matthew 12:1–8 (and its parallels in Mk 2:23–28 and Lk 6:1–5) constitutes such a *chreia*, a recounting of the incident in which the disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, Jesus's 'stereotypical opponents', rebuke him for failing to restrain his disciples (Murphy 2005:30). Jesus uses the confrontation to explain that the Sabbath was made for humankind and that authority – lordship – over the Sabbath belongs to him, the Son of Man. The three Gospels record no response from the Pharisees; perhaps Jesus's claim left them speechless.

Son of Man

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man approximately 30 times in Matthew, and repeatedly in Mark, Luke, and John. In the Old Testament, the expression son of man refers both to the figure seen by Daniel in a vision (Dn 7:13–14) and to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezk 2:1).

In the New Testament, Son of Man appears to be Jesus's preferred self-description – his preferred second name. One example occurs in a conversation with a scribe who wishes to follow him. Jesus replies, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Mt 8:20). The sad irony is striking: the Lord of creation lacks even the shelter granted to foxes and birds. This self-designation Son of Man carries connotations of inner struggle (see Bressler 1999:11) as well as eschatological and apocalyptic elements (Hahn 1969:25).

The title Son of Man covers Jesus's humanity, messiahship, and future role as judge. While it appears to emphasise his humanity, it also came to be recognised as a title that signals his expanding future role as Messiah. It is never used casually (Hare 1993:94). It anticipates his upcoming death and resurrection (Mt 12:40). It announces his triumphant return on the 'clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (Mt 24:30) and proclaims the final judgement in which people will be separated as sheep and goats – respectively for eternal joy in the kingdom or eternal punishment elsewhere (Mt 25:31–46). In short, this self-designation reveals Jesus's authority to judge, to forgive sins, to return, and to reign.

Holladay (2017:211) suggests that the titles *Son of God* and *Son of Man* function 'as two centers of an ellipse' framing Matthew's portrayal of Christ. Viljoen (2021:26) likewise

describes Son of Man as one of the Bible's 'richest Christological statements'.

Beloved

Matthew appears to understand 'Beloved' as a proper name. The setting is Jesus's baptism by John. Viljoen (2019:3) describes the baptism as a public act of humility. Boring and Craddock (2004:21), noting the endearment's connection to Isaiah 42:1, observe that Jesus is both the Son and 'the obedient one'.

'And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"' (Mt 3:17). This is a striking designation – a public, unconcealed declaration of Jesus's messiahship (see Murphy 2005:146). The name Beloved also echoes Genesis 22:2, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice 'your only son' (Meier 1980:28).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language conveys content (Fishman 1972:1); consequently, this pronouncement – this special designation – is profoundly significant. The heavenly voice is accompanied by a visible representation of the Spirit resting upon Jesus like a dove (Dowsett 2002:524). Indeed, Israel's entire history has moved toward the Messiah's coming and this public announcement (Meier 1980:4, 28).

Together, these examples demonstrate that special designations reveal divine relationships, illuminate aspects of Jesus's character, deepen the understanding of his messiahship, and lay the foundation for his ministry. Jesus, an atypical hero, eats with sinners, touches lepers, and fails to rebuke his disciples when they pluck grain on the Sabbath (see Joubert 2019).

A final word and two additional titles

Contemporary biblical scholars may also be understood as coining special designations. Two such examples may be noted. Firstly, Wright (2016:67–71) offers a compelling explanation of why Matthew 1:1–17, the genealogy of Jesus, was of such importance – initially for Jewish converts and now for contemporary readers. The passage's units can be seen in multiples of 14 and three or as six sevens. As Wright (2016) observes:

> At every seven-times-seven years, they had – or were supposed to have had, according to Leviticus – a jubilee … With Jesus we get the seventh seven. He is the jubilee in person. (p. 70–71)

Secondly, Viljoen (2021:26), the recipient of this honorary journal issue, notes that 'in the post-resurrection scene, Jesus is called "the living one"'. These two designations – Jesus as the jubilee and the living one – highlight joyful and eternal dimensions of his identity and character.

Conclusion

This article on specific descriptions in the Gospel of Matthew represents a preliminary study. Research indicates that such descriptions offer valuable insights from a social-scientific perspective (see Malina & Neyrey 1988:xv). Further research could profitably explore the following areas:

- Specific descriptions in the Synoptics and New Testament.
- Comparisons of specific descriptions between the Old and New Testaments.
- Comparisons between biblical nicknames and those found in ancient literature.
- The use of specific descriptions within particular biblical genres such as law, prophecy, and poetry.
- Insights from psychology concerning biblical names and nicknames.
- The theological importance of special designations such as endearments, insults, nicknames, and slurs.
- The process by which descriptive phrases such as Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath in Matthew became titles.
- Using Matthew 23 as a starting point for the study of the insulting category of hypocrites throughout the Bible.
- Comparisons between the article's categories and similar categories in the Mediterranean world; useful points of entry include Fitzgerald (2016) on orphans and Galoppin et al. (eds. 2022) on names.

This article demonstrates Matthew's abundant use of specific descriptions. These not only illuminate linguistic and cultural dimensions but also reveal secondary or underlying psychological themes within the text (see Klein et al. 2004:220). For instance, Jesus's quick responses to insults serve as a model for his followers. Specific descriptions frequently provide exposition and background information; they help frame the stories or passages in which they appear (see Bonazza & Roy 1968:576). The Beatitudes, for instance, foreground human worth. Repeatedly, specific descriptions 'make meaning from the text' (see Bressler 1999:6). As sophisticated linguistic tools, they reveal relationships both between individuals and between individuals and society.

This article advances a new proposal: reading the biblical text through the lens of specific descriptions. Such descriptions appear on nearly every page of the Bible and readily lend themselves to categorisation. As this article argues, this interpretive lens has largely been overlooked and merits further scholarly attention.

The article shows that specific descriptions – such as appositives, nicknames, and newly assigned monikers – contribute significantly to the biblical text. They can reveal, as Alter (1981:22) notes, the artful etching of a character's imperfections and strengths. Wherever they occur, they add depth and insight. A study of specific descriptions offers a

practical, informative, academically sound, and even enjoyable framework for reading, studying, and teaching Scripture (see Fishman 1972:107). It opens up *Wortkunst*, what Bressler (1999:10) calls 'the imaginative and creative aspects of literature'. It also invites reflection on the many silences of Scripture and on the ways in which a specific description guides interpretation.

However, such a study inevitably raises questions. One such question remains unanswered. The article opened with reference to a surprising possibility in Revelation. It is fitting to return to it here.

The risen Lord Jesus instructs John to write to the church in Pergamum words that apply to all believers. He promises the one who overcomes: 'I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it' (Rv 2:17).

What kind of specific description will this new name be? Indeed, might it be a nickname?

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Robin Gallaher Branch: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, project administration, resources, writing – review & editing and supervision. The author confirms that this work is entirely her own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University, Theology Research Ethics Committee (No. NWU-01342/25/A6).

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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