Eternal Life in the Synoptic ‘Call of the Rich Man’ Narrative

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I. Introduction

In an episode recorded in all three synoptic gospels, an affluent Jew poses the following question to Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Although the focus of the story is a rich man’s denial of Jesus’ call to discipleship, his question provides a window into the meaning and significance of the phrase ‘eternal life’ in early Christian usage.1 What is ‘eternal life’ (ζωὴ αἰωνίου) in the synoptic gospels and what attendant beliefs and assumptions are attached to it? To which body of existing traditions does the synoptic understanding of ‘eternal life’ belong? What is the meaning and significance of ‘eternal life’ for the synoptic evangelists?

Jewish eschatological beliefs were diverse in early Judaism, with beliefs ranging from the repudiation of the afterlife by the Sadducees, to bodily resurrection and the immortality of the soul.2 N. T. Wright observes, “Almost any position one can imagine on the subject appears to have been espoused by some Jews somewhere in the period between the Maccabean crisis and the writing of the Mishnah, roughly 200 BC to AD

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1 This narrative will hereafter be referred to as the ‘Call of the Rich Man’.
Although ‘eternal life’ will become a significant expression synonymous with the Christian eschatological hope and salvation (see Acts 13:46–48), the phrase was also employed by various other early Jewish writers.

Secondly, ‘eternal life’ seems to convey more than just the idea that an afterlife exists. In the discourse immediately following the ‘The Call of the Rich Man’, ‘eternal life’ is synonymous with ‘entering the kingdom of God’ and ‘salvation’. However, most debates concerning ‘eternal life’ have centered on the possible modes of existence in the afterlife rather than the theological context of the expression itself. Oscar Cullman, for example, argued famously in 1945 that the Greek idea of ‘the immortality of the soul’ is incompatible with Christian belief in ‘the resurrection of the body’.

Notable scholars such as Alan Segal and Jan Bremmer have studied afterlife beliefs as a religious phenomenon across different cultures, and have traced the historical and sociological development of Christian afterlife concepts. Wright devoted an entire volume on the theological significance of the resurrection of only one individual, namely Jesus. However, the question of ‘eternal life’ in its biblical and theological context


4 The Qumran Community saw themselves as the locus of eternal life (1QH 3:19–38; 6:1–7:5; 11:3–14). Aseneth was given eternal life after she repented her idolatry (Jos. Asen. 15–16). Pss. Sol. 3, 13, 14, 15 mentions the resurrection of the righteous unto eternal life. In 2 Macc 7:9 ‘eternal life’ is the martyr’s vindication.


7 Wright, The Resurrection.
in the synoptic gospels has not been fully answered.\textsuperscript{8} ‘Eternal life’ and ‘life’ are much larger themes in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul, and have thereby generated greater scholarly attention in Johannine and Pauline studies, but there has yet to be a comprehensive exegetical study on the synoptic gospels with respect to ‘eternal life’.\textsuperscript{9}

The following analysis will be an exploratory exegetical study of the ‘Call of the Rich Man’ pericope in two of the synoptic gospels, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, with the purpose of investigating more fully the synoptic gospel writers’ understanding of ‘eternal life’ in these works. It will be seen that the synoptic portrayals of ‘eternal life’ in Mark and Matthew is far richer and multivalent than the idea of immortality alone, and that although the expression does not occur very often in the synoptic gospels, it is nonetheless closely related to other important themes in the synoptic tradition.

As already mentioned above, the ‘Call of the Rich Man’ is the only gospel account where ‘eternal life’ is mentioned in the same pericope in all three synoptic gospels. The narrative is essentially a \textit{failed} call-narrative, in which the rich man in the story rejects


Jesus’ invitation to discipleship. This basic plot, notwithstanding noticeable differences, is found in Mark 10:17–31, Matt 19:16–30, and Luke 18:18–30. The account is sometimes referred to as the story of ‘The Rich Young Ruler’, however, such a title harmonizes details from all three gospels. In Matthew’s gospel, the rich man is called a ‘young man’ (Matt 19:20), but in Mark’s version of the story, he is likely an older man, since “he has kept the commandments since his youth” (Mark 10:20). It is only in Luke’s account that he is referred to specifically as ‘a certain ruler’ (Luke 18:18). Although the general structure and discourse of the story is retained in all three gospels, there are subtle changes specific to each gospel. For this reason, the episode as recorded by each evangelist will be explored separately. The following analysis will begin with Mark’s account and end with Matthew’s account. Each section will begin with a literary analysis of the text, followed by a discussion of the implications for understanding ‘eternal life’. In the interest of space, the discussion of ‘eternal life’ in Luke will be postponed for further study.

II. The ‘Call of the Rich Man’: Mark 10:17-31

1. Literary Context

The ‘Call of the Rich Man’ pericope contains the only explicit references to ‘eternal life’ in the Gospel of Mark. The episode is inserted towards the end of Jesus’ emblematic journey to Jerusalem (8:22–10:52), followed only by the dubious request of the sons of Zebedee, and the healing of blind Bartimaeus. The journey, which comprises a significant section of the gospel, is sandwiched between the healing of two blind men: one at the beginning of the

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10 As also noted by C. S. Mann, Mark (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 398.
journey and the other at the end (cf. 8:22–26; 10:46–52). The purpose of the journey is clear, as evinced by Jesus’ three-fold passion predictions scattered throughout this section: he will be betrayed, killed, but will rise again after three days (8:31; 9:30–31; 10:32–34). The content of the journey includes various teachings on discipleship (8:34–38; 9:35–37; 10:42–45), the transfiguration (9:2–13), a rectified exorcism (9:14–29), an argument about greatness (9:33–50), and some requests made of Jesus. Some Pharisees, with the intention of testing him, ask Jesus a question about divorce (10:1–12). People bring children along so that Jesus might touch and bless them (10:13–16). A rich man has a question regarding eternal life, and shortly after, James and John ask Jesus for a special favor (10:17–31, 35–45). The ‘Call of the Rich Man’ is located in the context of these themes: it is one story, among other similar accounts, of someone who has a question for Jesus as he and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. It is immediately preceded by the account of Jesus blessing the little children and saying, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:15). The brief episode acts as a literary foil to the ‘Call of the Rich Man’, in which Jesus declares that it is nearly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The reluctance of the rich man to lay down his possessions is also a stark contrast to Bartimaeus in the following narrative, who upon being healed throws off


12 Mark has an affinity for triadic patterns: three seed parables, three popular opinions about John, three popular opinions about Jesus, three failures of the disciples to stay awake in the garden, and three denials of Jesus by Peter, etc. See Luke Timothy Johnson, The Writings of the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 162.

13 See also Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27–16:20 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 91.
his cloak and follows Jesus “on the way” (10:50–52). The story begins with a question about ‘eternal life’ (v. 17), and concludes with Jesus promising ‘eternal life’ to his followers (v. 30). Peter’s announcement of support for Jesus in v. 28 is a response to the rich man’s rejection and Jesus’ comments. As much as the episode is about rich people and their relation to the kingdom, it is also about the requirements of the kingdom, as well as the reward for faithful discipleship.

2. Implications for Eternal Life

i. The Question of Eternal Life

The rich man inquires, “What must I do to inherit ‘eternal life’?” Every questioner, as revealed by the way their question is framed, has assumptions about the nature of the answer they expect to receive. The rich man, by his question, assumes that Jesus shares a common understanding of ‘eternal life’, and that he might be the sort of teacher who is able to impart knowledge of this kind. The rich man uses the language of inheritance (κληρονομήσω) in reference to ‘eternal life’, assuming that the means to ‘eternal life’ is through inheritance. In addition, an inheritance suggests that it is something to be received in the future, and the evangelist confirms this in v. 30 that ‘eternal life’ will be the reward in the age to come (ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ). Thirdly, the rich man assumes that ‘eternal life’ can be inherited through something he can do (τί ποιήσω). ‘Eternal life’ in the narrative will be analyzed with respect to these three assumptions.

ii. A Common Understanding of the Nature of ‘Eternal Life’

The rich man’s first assumption is that Jesus is cognizant of ‘eternal life’ and is competent to impart knowledge regarding it.

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Is the question about ‘eternal life’ in general (i.e., “what must I do to inherit the eternal life that all religious Jews know about?”),\(^\text{15}\) or ‘eternal life’ that is specific to the teachings of Jesus (i.e., “what must I do to inherit the eternal life of which you speak?”)? It is curious that throughout Mark’s Gospel, there is no explicit mention of ‘eternal life’ neither prior to this episode nor following it. There are also two references to ζωή unaccompanied by αἰώνιος (but used in the same sense) in Jesus’ statement about it being better to “enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell” (9:43–45), but it is by no means a major theme or teaching in the rest of the gospel.\(^\text{16}\) It is possible that Jesus did teach concerning ‘eternal life’ but it was not an important concern for the evangelist, or that he did not have access to the relevant materials. Another possibility is that it was a general question not directly related to any specific teaching of Jesus. After all, many people, impressed with Jesus’ authority and wisdom, were approaching him with all kinds of questions (12:17, 28, 37b, etc.). The Pharisees ask him about divorce and paying taxes to Caesar (10:2–12; 12:13–17). The Sadducees pose an intentionally absurd question about the resurrection, and a scribe questions him about the first of all the commandments (12:18–27, 28–34). It seems that perhaps ‘eternal life’ could simply be another random question in this disparate list of topics. However, a closer examination of the text reveals that ‘eternal life’ seems to be synonymous with, or at least closely connected to, several other ideas that do appear in the gospel.

The rich man asks how he might obtain ‘eternal life’, but in vv. 23–25, Jesus exclaims three times that it is difficult for the rich “to enter the kingdom of God” (ἐίς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

\(^{15}\) A rabbinic parallel can be found in b. "Abod. Zar. 18a: “Rabbi . . . will you cause me to enter the life of the World to Come?”

\(^{16}\) See also Mark 8:34–38, where a ψυχή as something to be gained in the future is mentioned.
Furthermore, in v. 26 the disciples, in response to Jesus’ remark, ask each other: “Who then can be saved?” (καὶ τίς δύναται σωθῆναι) This suggests that for the Markan evangelist there is a connection between ‘eternal life’, entering the kingdom and salvation.\(^{17}\) In Mark 9:42–48, the same association is made between ‘life’ and the kingdom of God. In fact, ‘life’ in vv. 43–45 is not to be inherited (κληρονομέω), but entered into (ἐσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν); the same language of ‘entering’ is used to refer to both entering life and access to the kingdom of God. On the other hand, the language of inheritance is also used of the kingdom of God. In Matt 25:34, for example, the king in Jesus’ parable invites the sheep to inherit the kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world (κληρονομήσατε τὴν ἡτοιμασμένην ὑμῖν βασιλείαν ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου). Paul, in 1 Corinthians also described people “inheriting the kingdom of God” (cf. 1 Cor 6:9; 15:50; see also Gal 5:21). A comprehensive treatment of the kingdom of God in Mark is not possible given the scope of this essay, but it is sufficient for the present to note that in certain texts the terms ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘eternal life’ are used both interchangeably and with the same ancillary verbs. The concepts of ‘salvation’, ‘savior’, and ‘being saved’ are used much more frequently in Luke than in either Mark or Matthew,\(^{18}\) but there

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18 The synoptic distribution of the terms σώζω, σωτήρ, and σωτηρία (Luke: 23 occurrences, Matt: 15, Mark: 16) do not adequately convey Luke’s preference for the terms because σώζω is also used in Matthew and Mark more broadly to refer to healing, i.e., being ‘saved’ from blindness and other illnesses, etc. Cf. Mark 10:52; Matt 9:22.
is still evidence of overlap of these concepts with the ideas of ‘the kingdom of God’ and ‘eternal life’. In 2 Tim 4:18, God will save [the author of 2 Timothy] into his heavenly kingdom (σώσει εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπουράνιον). Likewise, in 2 Pet 1:11 the writer mentions the entrance into the eternal kingdom of “our lord and savior Jesus Christ” (ἡ εἰσοδος εἰς τὴν αἰώνιον βασιλείαν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ σωτήρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). Finally, in Heb 1:14, ministering spirits are sent on account of the “salvation that is about to be inherited” (τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν). As with ‘eternal life’ and the kingdom of God, the language of inheritance is also used in regard to salvation.

iii. The Language of Inheritance

In Mark 10:22 the reader is informed that the man is someone who has many possessions (ἐχὼν κτήματα πολλά). Titus 3:7 mentions becoming heirs according to the hope of ‘eternal life’ (κληρονόμοι γεννηθῶμεν κατ ἐλπίδα ζωῆς αἰωνίου), but can this connection also be traced in the Jewish background outside of the New Testament? In several works of the OT pseudepigrapha, there is mention of the inheritance of ‘eternal life’ and ‘life’. For example, in the Psalms of Solomon, the inheritance of the wicked is death, darkness, and destruction, but “the pious of the Lord shall inherit life in gladness.”19 In 1 En. 50:2, Phanuel is the name of the angel of the Lord “set over the repentance unto hope of those who inherit eternal life.” In 2 En. 50:3, ‘Enoch’ urges his children to spend their days in patience and meekness, that they may “inherit endless life” on the day of great judgment. He continues on in his exhortation, “Whoever of you spends gold or silver for his brother’s sake, he will receive ample treasure in the world to come.” Jesus gives a similar command in Mark 10:21: “Go, sell

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what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have
treasure in heaven.” The parallel does not end there. Compare also
the exhortation found in 2 En. 51:4, “... every grievous and cruel
yoke that come upon you bear all for the sake of the Lord, and
thus you will find your reward in the day of judgment,” with the
exhortation found at the end of the ‘Call of the Rich Man’ in Mark
10:29–30, “there is no one who has left house or . . . fields, for
my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a
hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers
and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come
eternal life.” And in 2 Bar. 44:12–15:

And the hour comes which abides for ever. And the new world
(comes) which does not turn to corruption those who depart
to its blessedness, And has no mercy on those who depart to
torment, And leads not to perdition those who live in it. For
these are they who shall inherit that time which has been spoken
of, And theirs is the inheritance of the promised time. These are
they who have acquired for themselves treasures of wisdom,
And with them are found stores of understanding, And from
mercy have they not withdrawn, And the truth of the law have
they preserved. For to them shall be given the world to come,
But the dwelling of the rest who are many shall be in the fire.20

It can be seen from these later Jewish texts that, in at least
some Jewish circles prior to the first century C.E., there was
already a notion of a futuristic ‘eternal life’ to be inherited by
the righteous. This life is set in the context of a future reality
described as ‘a new world’, ‘the world to come’, ‘the promised
time’, and ‘the day of judgment’. It is plausible that the ‘Call of

20 Translations taken from R. H. Charles, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*
(Oxford: Clarendon, 1913). Italics are added for emphasis.
the Rich Man’ also draws on these traditions and ideations of post-mortem recompense. Inheritance of ‘eternal life’, the kingdom, and salvation as rewards for the righteous is consistent with some patterns of early Jewish thinking.

One other aspect of inheritance is that of its relation to sonship; it is a reward which is given to a son within the family (cf. Luke 12:13; 15:12, etc.). In the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19), the vineyard is a symbol of Israel and the kingdom of God, of which the son of the owner, namely Jesus, is heir. The wicked tenants conspire among themselves, “this is the heir; come let us kill him and the inheritance will be ours” (οὐτός ἐστιν ὁ κληρονόμος· δεῦτε ἀποκτείνωμεν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἡμῶν ἔσται ἡ κληρονομία). After the wicked tenants are punished, the vineyard will then be given to those who will be faithful to produce fruits of the kingdom to the owner (Matt 21:41). In the context of Matthew, faithful tenants are the ones who hear Jesus’ message, who understand it and act upon it (Matt 13:23). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is depicted addressing God as a father and encouraging his followers to do the same (Matt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:8–9; 11:25; Mark 14:36; Luke 6:36, etc.). Matthew 13:38 speaks of those receptive to the message of Jesus as sons of the kingdom (οἱ νεόφυοι τῆς βασιλείας). Jesus’ adult followers are called ‘children’ in Mark 10:24 and are taught to think of themselves as sons in relation to God (Matt 7:11; 17:26; Luke 6:35; 20:36). In the explanation to the parable of the sower in Matt 13:43, the righteous “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” This theme of sonship and inheritance is even more explicit in Paul’s letters. In Rom 9:4, Paul writes that adoption into sonship belongs to Israel, and in other texts Gentiles also receive “adoption as children of God through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:5; see also Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5). Elsewhere in Rom 8:16–17, Paul connects the motif of sonship to inheritance, explaining that “it is that very Spirit bearing witness
with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” A similar idea is found in Gal 3:29: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” For Paul, sonship is closely related to the Spirit, however, it can be seen from these texts that first century writers closely associated the ideas of sonship and inheritance.

iv. The Means to ‘Eternal Life’

As seen in the discussion above, the rich man’s question is further-reaching (as far as the Markan evangelist is concerned) than simply a matter of obtaining an unending life. It is a question about the kingdom, salvation, and being included into the inheritance of the righteous. In Matt 6:33, Jesus exhorts his listeners to “seek first the kingdom and [God’s] righteousness.” The question here, essentially, is one concerning righteousness and so the rich man asks: what thing should I do (τί ποιήσω)? In other words, the rich man wishes to know the requirements for being counted among the righteous in eschatological terms. This kind of question is common in Jewish circles of this period and is similar to questions previously posed to Jesus. For example, the question about which commandment of the law is the greatest or the first (Matt 22:36; Mark 12:28) requires Jesus to divulge his understanding of the law and what is necessary for righteousness. The commandments Jesus lists for the rich man are from the second half of the Decalogue (Exod 20:12–17; Deut 5:16–21), which pertains to “loving one’s neighbor” (Lev 19:18; see also Rom 13:9). The topic of Jesus and the Law is the subject of much scholarly discussion and will

21 Except for the fifth command, which is left until the end, the order of the commandments follows the Hebrew text rather than that of the LXX. The prohibitions are also in the subjunctive mood rather than the indicative mood used in the LXX commands.
not be explored in detail here, but his answer to the rich man is characteristic of his attitude towards the Law in the rest of the synoptic gospels; he believes that “keeping the true spirit of the Law guarantees eternal life.”22 According to Wis 5:15, “. . . the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord . . . ”23 Craig A. Evans observes that this is confirmed by the conclusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus answers, “Do this, and you will live.” He hears this as an echo of Lev 18:5, “which the person shall do and live by them.” The Targums to Leviticus paraphrase the verse in the following ways: “by doing which, he shall live by them in eternal life,” and “by doing which he shall live by them in eternal life and shall be assigned a portion with the righteous.”24 While Jesus affirms the law, he also suggests that it is not sufficient and advocates a righteousness which supercedes the letter of the law.25

In Mark 10:21 Jesus tells the rich man he lacks one thing (ἐν σε ὑστερεῖ) when in fact several things are demanded of him. A number of imperatives are given: ὑπάγε ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον καὶ δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς, καὶ ἔξεις θησαυρῶν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ δεῦρο ἁκολουθεῖ μοι. The imperatives in the verse can be arranged as follows in the following sentence diagram to illustrate what is expected of the rich man:

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22 Evans, Mark, 95.
23 See also Wis 6:18; 18:4 (NRSV).
24 Tg. Onq. Lev 18:5; Tg. Ps.-J. Lev 18:5.
25 See also Matt 5:20: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”
The pair of commands “go” and “come(!) follow me” are complementary to each other in that the rich man is to go in order that he may sell what he has and give to the poor, and then he is to come and follow Jesus. The imperatives πώλησον and δῶς are to be grouped together and subordinated under ὑπαγε, and if obeyed will result in the rich man having treasure in heaven. This is repeated in Luke’s adaptation of the so-called ‘Q material’, “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven . . . ” (Luke 12:33; cf. Matt 6:19–21). After he has done this, the rich man is then to come and follow Jesus. The imperative ἀκολούθει μοι is the same one employed by Jesus to call Levi the tax collector in Mark 2:14, and is the same language used in discipleship throughout the gospels (Matt 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; Mark 8:34; John 1:43, etc.). The crux of the series of imperatives is discipleship, the ‘one thing’ the rich man is lacking. And it is precisely his wealth that prevents him from following Jesus.26

The episode comes to a tragic conclusion, and Jesus laments how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom. He reiterates this statement twice more, once making a hyperbolic comparison of a rich person entering the kingdom of God with that of a camel entering the eye of a needle. The disciples are

26 The explanatory γὰρ reveals it is because of the man’s many possessions.
amazed at this but Jesus responds that although it is impossible for men, with God all things are possible.27 Peter then speaks up, perhaps in moral support of Jesus (who seemed to be lamenting the rejection of the rich man) or perhaps in self-interest,28 tells Jesus that although the rich man rejects him, the disciples have left everything to follow him (Mark 10:28). The whole episode comes to a close with Jesus affirming Peter’s words of encouragement and announcing that the many sacrifices made for his sake, and for the sake of the good news, will be compensated both “in this age and in the age to come.”

III. The ‘Call of the Rich Man’ : Matt 19:16-30

1. Literary Context

Matthew’s adaptation of the Markan episode is used to underscore the significant theme of the reversal of what it means to be a significant person in the Matthean ‘kingdom of heaven’, and who gets to be included in this kingdom. Indeed, in the Gospel of Matthew the reversal of the popular idea of greatness is quintessential to Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of heaven29 and his own self-understanding.30 The general framework of Matt 19–20 closely follows that of Mark 10, as can be seen in the figure below:

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27 Evans attributes the disciples’ surprise to “the assumption of conventional wisdom that wealth is a sign of divine blessing.” Mark’s Gospel is replete with instances demonstrating the disciples’ remarkable lack of understanding of Jesus and his teachings. See Evans, Mark, 91.

28 In the Matthean version of the episode (19:27), Peter also asks, “What then will we have?”

29 Jesus said to them [the chief priests and the elders of the people], “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:31).

30 “… just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28).
The overarching metaphor that Jesus uses in chapter 18 for a member of the ‘kingdom of heaven’ is that of a child, and this is emphasized by the episode of Jesus blessing the children and saying that the kingdom belongs to them. According to Thomas Wiedmann’s study on children in the Roman Empire, “classical society relegated children, together with women, old men, and slaves, to the margins of community life.” Children were seen as a burden, and they had no status until they became of age. Children are socially powerless. Therefore, Jesus’ saying that one must enter the kingdom “like a child” means that one must not conform to the society’s rules of status, and refrain from ostracizing those who do not have status. The exchange between the rich man and Jesus is more involved in Matthew than in Mark, and resembles a challenge and riposte situation, whereby one’s status is established through the acquisition of honor. Symbols of status and honor

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<tr>
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<td>2. Pharisees test Jesus regarding divorce</td>
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<td>5. The parable of the day laborers</td>
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31 Thomas Wiedmann, Adults and Children in the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 176.
33 ‘Responsive chreia’ is a rhetorical form in an honor and shame society, in
include wealth and public displays of success, and the rich man’s public questioning of Jesus may have been an attempt to procure further status. The recurring theme in the surrounding passages is that the ‘kingdom of heaven’ is characterized by a great reversal of the contemporary world order.

2. The Implications of Eternal Life

As in the Markan account, ‘eternal life’ is synonymous or closely related to the ‘kingdom of heaven’ (vv. 23–24) and salvation (v. 25). The language of ‘entering into life’ and ‘inheriting eternal life’ are also both used. Of particular interest is the Matthean (also Lukan) addition in Jesus’ reply to Peter, saying “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (19:28). The phrase ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ is obscure; the only other occurrence of παλιγγενεσία is found in Titus 3:5, in connection to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. E. Schürer and W. Bousset both take ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ to refer to “the renewing of the world at the time of the Messiah, and eschatological sense.” Similarly, John Nolland interprets it to be a cosmic renewal of the world similar to that alluded to in Isaiah and the wider Jewish tradition. 

which an opponent challenges Jesus in some way trying to elicit a defensive reply. The nature of the confrontation is not necessarily hostile, but it is of a public nature. See J. H. Neyrey, Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew (Atlanta: WJKP, 1998), 50.

34 “Entering into life” and “entering the kingdom” seem to be used interchangeably in this pericope.


The future orientation of this renewal is evident, given the nature of what is to take place (a reconstitution of Israel and an eschatological judgment), but what is the significance of the Son of Man sitting on his throne of glory? There are sixty-nine occurrences of the title ‘Son of Man’ in the synoptic gospels, and while the identity of the figure is disputed, the gospels’ use of the expression seems to associate the title with the heavenly redeemer figure in texts like 1 En. 37–71 and Dan 7:13. The parallel of 1 Enoch to Matt 19:28 is striking: 1 En. 62:5 has “... the son of man sitting on the throne of his glory,” and 69:29 mentions “that Son of Man has appeared and has seated himself on the throne of glory.” Nolland suggests that the association between the role of the Son of Man and the twelve “is likely to be inspired by the paralleling in Dan 7 of a Son of Man and the Saints of the Most High (esp. cf. vv. 14 and 27).” Robert H. Gundry observes that ‘judging’ in the context of this sentence has the meaning of dominion and governing, as in Dan 7:9–27 when

one like a son of man was coming ... and to him was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom ... and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the kingdom, the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Most High.


38 Also perhaps used in connection to Ps 110.

39 Nolland, Matthew, 801.

40 Gundry, Matthew, 393.
In other words, the language of judgment, as well as that of the thrones, conveys the concept of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{41} Again, one finds that the inheritance of ‘eternal life’ does not stand alone but occurs within the context of the future kingdom of God.

**IV. Summary**

It can be seen in the above analyses of the ‘Call of the Rich Man’ that ‘eternal life’ in the synoptic tradition of Mark and Matthew is a conceptually rich expression that denotes more than just immortality. ‘Eternal life’ is a theologically loaded expression that is best understood as belonging to a constellation of ideas that together represent their eschatological convictions in a decidedly Judeo-Christian framework. In the ‘Call of the Rich Man’ in all three synoptic gospels, ‘eternal life’ is closely related to the kingdom of God/Heaven, as well as salvation. The rich man wishes to inherit ‘eternal life’, but his failure to do so is described in terms of “entering the kingdom of God” and “being saved.” In Matthew’s parallel of Mark 9:47 (18:9), entrance into ‘life’ is used in place of Mark’s entrance into the ‘kingdom of God’. The ancillary verbs used in association with these expressions (inheriting, entering, etc.) are also used somewhat interchangeably. Finally, because the Matthean and Markan evangelists interpret ‘eternal life’ from a Jewish context, notions like righteousness, inheritance, and the eschatological Son of Man figure are also present in discussions about ‘eternal life’.

Many commentators have already observed the connection between ‘eternal life’ and entry into the kingdom of God, but the implications of the association have yet to be fully realized. For instance, it is generally acknowledged that ‘eternal life’ does not figure prominently in the synoptic gospels. However, this

\textsuperscript{41} Gundry suggests that the ‘kingdom’ motif in the Lukan parallel has been transmuted into “the figure of a glorious throne.” Ibid., 392.
contention may have to be re-evaluated if ‘eternal life’ might also be in view whenever the kingdom of God is mentioned. This paper focused on the analysis of the use of ‘eternal life’ in just one pericope in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Studies on other passages that also mention ‘eternal life’ would further illuminate and corroborate the current investigation. Furthermore, ‘salvation’, which is also an expression related to the ‘eternal life’ conceptual network, is a central theme in the Gospel of Luke, and would make for a fruitful study into Luke’s concept of ‘eternal life’, further enriching our understanding of the synoptic usage of the expression and related concepts.⁴²

⁴² There are 23 occurrences of the word group (σώζω, σωτηρία, σωτήρ) in Luke and only 16 in Mark and 15 in Matthew.