

THE IDENTITY OF THE CENTURION'S ΠΑῖΣ IN MATTHEW 8:5-13: A NARRATIVE APPROACH¹

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In Matthean studies the identity of the centurion's παῖς, "servant, servant boy, child," who was suffering at home is not clear (Matt 8:5-13). This is due to the fact that from a lexical point of view παῖς could be translated as "boy" or as "servant." If it is interpreted as a boy, then the of the Gospel reader understands that the centurion probably was concerned about his son's health. On the other hand, if the centurion was worried because one of his servants or slaves was suffering, the reader may consider the centurion as a good master. This paper proposes to analyse the identity of the centurion's παῖς considering two approaches: the use of παῖς in the LXX and, the use of παῖς in the Gospel of Matthew by applying narrative critical techniques.

Key Words: Matthew 8, centurion, slave, son, narrative approach

1. Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew records that a centurion approached Jesus requesting healing for his παῖς who was "lying at home paralyzed" (Matt 8:5-13).² The semantics of the word παῖς allows for both translations "child/boy" and "servant,"³ thus it seems unclear if the text refers to the centurion's child/son or his servant. While the majority of the

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² Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

³ Also, depending on its article or adjective attributes, the word παῖς can be translated as feminine or masculine (cf. Matt 26:69; Luke 8:51-54). See J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Society, 1989), 1:110, 741.

English Bible versions render *παῖς* as “servant”⁴ there are some that identify him as a “servant boy” or a “young man” thus retaining the meaning of servant.⁵ Scholars have used different reasons for the meaning of “servant.”⁶ Some argue that the Matthew pericope is related to Luke 7:1-10, a text that narrates the healing of a centurion’s *δούλος*, “servant,” in Capernaum (Luke 7:2), thus, the *παῖς* in Matt 8 should also be translated as servant.⁷ Others hold to the general use of *παῖς* as “servant” in the LXX.⁸ The implication of translating *παῖς* as servant may involve that the story in Matt 8 is depicting the centurion as a good master who takes care of those who work for him.

Other scholars have preferred to translate *παῖς* as “child”⁹ or “son.”¹⁰ The argument for this translation is partially based on redaction

⁴ E.g., NRSV, NIV, TNIV, NAB, NASB, NJB, ESV, ESVS, BBE, KJB, ASV, CEV, MESSAGE, REB, TEV.

⁵ While the *Amplified Bible* translates *παῖς* as “servant boy” (8:6, 8, 13), the *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* renders it as “young man” (8:5, 13) and “servant” (8:8). See also the *Complete Jewish Bible*, which translates *παῖς* as “orderly.”

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 265; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 311-312; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 354; Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 77, n. 2; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 192; and W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 2:21; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 200-201; W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (Anchor Bible 26; New York: Doubleday, 1984), 93. See also Herbert W. Bassler, *The Mind Behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1-14* (Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies, 2009), 212, who translates the word as “houseboy.”

⁷ Grant Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament 1; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 290; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (New International Biblical Commentary 1; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 74; and France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 312.

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 354.

⁹ G. Zuntz, “The ‘Centurion’ of Capernaum and his Authority (Matt 8:5-13),” *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1945), 188; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 9-10.

¹⁰ Joaquin Gonzalez Echegaray, “Los esclavos en la Palestina del Tiempo de Jesus,” *Salm 56* (2009), 107-108; and H. F. D. Starks, “The Centurion’s *παῖς*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1941), 179-180. Other Scholars, however, are more ambiguous in their position. See J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (Harmondsworth:

assumptions identifying a parallelism between Matt 8:5-13 and John 4:43-54. The narrative in the Gospel of John tells of the healing of the son of a royal official in Cana (John 4:46-47).¹¹ Seen from this perspective and translating *παῖς* as "boy" may imply that the pericope either is describing the concern of a father for his sick son or, as Theodore Jennings and Tat-siong Benny Liew have recently proposed, a pederastic relationship between the centurion and his boy-lover.¹²

Following the mainstream of translations, I will argue that *παῖς* is best translated as "servant."¹³ In my analysis, I propose to identify the centurion's *παῖς* from two perspectives. One implies to interpret the word *παῖς* in relation to its use in the LXX; the other considers a narrative critical approach to the use of *παῖς* in the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁴

Penguin Books, 1963), 124; and M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 8: 225.

- ¹¹ Ralph P. Martin, "The Pericope of the Healing of the 'Centurion's' Servant/Son (Matt 8:5-13 Par. Luke 7:1-10): Some Exegetical Notes," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 15; Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew* (Word Bible Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 33a:204; and Echegaray, "Los esclavos en la Palestina del Tiempo de Jesus," 118.
- ¹² Theodore W. Jennings, and Tat-siong Benny Liew, "Mistaken Identities But Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004), 467-494. Cf. Donald Mader, "The Entimos Pais of Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10," in *Homosexuality and Religion and Philosophy* (eds. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson; New York: Garland, 1992), 223-235. For a reply to this proposal see D. B. Saddington, "The Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006), 140-142.
- ¹³ I argue the same in my master's thesis in which I analysed Matt 8:5-13, among other pericopes, from a narrative perspective. See Carlos Olivares, "A Narrative Analysis of the Phrase "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth" in the Gospel of Matthew" (M.Th. diss., University of Auckland, 2010), 28-30.
- ¹⁴ Narrative criticism approaches texts from a text-oriented perspective, analysing them synchronically. See Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 67; Petri Merenlahati and Raimo Hakola, "Reconceiving Narrative Criticism," in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (ed. David M. Rhoads and Kari Syreeni; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 18; Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 7.

2. Παῖς as Boy in the Gospel of Matthew

The implied reader of the Gospel of Matthew¹⁵ may note that παῖς clearly speaks of a boy in the sense of a boy child or a son in chaps. 2:16; 17:18; 21:15. In addition, these three texts will show that another word meaning “child” is used in parallel thus working synonymously to παῖς.

2.1 Παῖς in Matthew 2:16

In Matt 2:16 Herod gives orders to kill all the παῖδας in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger. The παιδίον of this story (2:13) is a diminutive of παῖς,¹⁶ meaning “little or young child.”¹⁷ The

¹⁵ I suppose that the implied reader is an “informed” reader, which means that he or she is able to read and understand the Greek text and is familiar with the LXX. See Mark Allan Powell, “Expected and Unexpected Readings of Matthew: What the Reader Knows,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 48 (1993), 31-51. Cf. Dale C. Allison, “Anticipating the Passion: The Literary Reach of Matthew 26:47-27:56,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994), 703, who assumes that the informed readers (hearers) are those who (1) were familiar with the LXX and (2) heard and reheard Matthew. Cf. Warren Carter, “An Audience-Oriented Approach to Matthew’s Parables,” in *Matthew’s Parables* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 30; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1998), 11-12.

¹⁶ Louw & Nida, 1:109.

¹⁷ H. J. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1287. The term παιδίον normally describes a very young child up to seven years old [see W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 749; and Albrecht Oepke, “παιδίον,” G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 5:638. In the LXX, however, even though the word designates a new-born male child (Gen 17:12), it also describes a female old enough to get married (Tob 7:11), cf. T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009), 519. In the New Testament the term also makes reference to an infant just born (John 16:21), a child (cf. Matt 18:2; Mark 9:36) and a girl who is 12 years old (Mark 5:41-42; cf. 7:26, 30). According to Judith Gundry, the diminutive used to describe the 12 year-old girl “should be taken to indicate endearment rather than a small child.” Judith M. Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark,” in *The Child in the Bible* (Marcia J. Bunge, ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 147. However, it seems that παιδίον means “child,” without reference to its age, implying that in the context of Matt 2 “Jesus is no longer a baby at the time” the magi arrive. Barclay, Moon, Newman, and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 39. In Matt 2, παιδίον is used to designate a male child, which the narrative identifies as Jesus (Matt 2:8-23).

noun παιδίον is also used to describe the “child Jesus” in Matthew’s infancy narratives (2:8–9, 11, 13–14, 20–21).¹⁸ In this context and from a narrative perspective, the reader understands that Herod orders to kill the παιδάς because he aims to destroy the παιδίον Jesus (2:13-16).

In addition, the meaning of παῖς in Matt 2:16 may also be explained in function of the narrative unit in which it is located (2:16-18), which is preceded and ended by a formula quotation (2:15, 18). Thus, the meaning of παῖς in Matt 2:16 may be defined by the formula quotation that follows the scene in which Herod orders to destroy the παιδάς (2:16). The narrator informs that the destruction of children is the fulfilment of Jer 31:15 about “Rachel weeping for her children [τέκνα]” (Matt 2:17-18).¹⁹ Here, τέκνα may function as a synonym for παῖς, defining it as “child.” In other words, the narrative itself may give the definition of παῖς as “child.”

The same can be said about the word παιδίον used in the previous narrative unit (2:13-15). Table 1 shows that παιδίον is also defined in function of the formula quotation that follows the narrative, “out of Egypt I have called my son [τὸν υἱὸν μου]” (2:15).

Narrative	Fulfillment quotation
“Get up, take the child [παιδίον]” (2:13a) “Herod is about to search for the child [παιδίον]” (2:13b) “Took the child [παιδίον]” (2:14)	“Out of Egypt I have called my son [τὸν υἱὸν μου]” (2:15)
Herod orders to destroy the “children [παιδάς]” (2:16)	Rachel is weeping for her “children [τέκνα]” (2:18)

Table 1: Narrative and Fulfilment Quotations

¹⁸ In the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, as Cabrido says, the term is used to describe “anonymous children who appear in highly symbolic episodes.” John Aranda Cabrido, “A Typology for Discipleship: The Narrative Function of Paidion in Matthew’s Story of Jesus,” *Australian Biblical Review* 57 (2009), 48. Cf. Matt 11:16; 14:21; 15:38; 18:2-5; 19:13, 14.

¹⁹ In the Gospel of Matthew the word τέκνον is commonly used to refer to children in relationship to their parents (See 2:18; 7:11; 10:21; 18:25; 19:29; 21:28; 22:24; 27:25). It is also employed to highlight a symbolic statement (3:9; 15:26; 23:37) or to express affection (9:2). Cf. G. Schneider, “τέκνον,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-93), 3:341.

2.2 Παῖς in Matthew 17:18

In Matt 17:18 Jesus heals a παῖς, “child/boy/son” from the presence of a demon.²⁰ The narrative unit in which this verse is located is Matt 17:14-18 telling of a man who had brought his υἱός, “his son,” to be cured but Jesus’ disciples were not able to perform the healing (17:14-16). Jesus’ performance, however, is successful (17:17-18). The implied reader will notice that the narrative does not say that Jesus cured the man’s υἱός, but the παῖς (17:18). Here, υἱός and παῖς function as synonyms defining παῖς as a boy or son (Table 2).²¹

Man’s words	Narrator’s words
“Lord, have mercy on my son [υἱόν]” (Matt 17:15)	“The child/boy/son [παῖς] was cured instantly” (Matt 17:18)

Table 2: Υἱός and παῖς in Matthew 17:14-18

2.3 Παῖς in Matthew 21:15

In Matt 21:15 the chief priests and the scribes are angry because an undefined number of παῖδων, “children,” are shouting in the temple “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The narrative unit in which Matt 21:15 is found is Matt 21:14-16, which is preceded by a quotation from the LXX (21:14) and ends with a citation (21:16) identifying the παῖδων. Because the chief priests and the scribes ask Jesus about what the children are crying out, Jesus replies to them by citing a verse from the Psalms in which the poet declares that “from the lips of children [νηπίων] and infants [θηλαζόντων] you have ordained praise” (Matt 21:16 NIV; cf. Ps 8:2 [cf. Ps 8:3 MT]). For the reader, the meaning of the word νήπιος

²⁰ According to the narrative, the man says that his son is σεληνιάζομαι (17:15; cf. 4:24), which has been translated as “epileptic” (NRSV; TEV; ASV; AMP; CEV; ESV), “demented” (NJB), and “lunatic” (NAB; NASB). The implied author, however, informs that Jesus rebukes a δαμόνιον, “demon,” from the boy, healing him instantly (17:18).

²¹ Another example may be found in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus asks: “Is there anyone among you who would hand his son [υἱός] a stone when he asked for bread?” (Matt 7:9 NJB). Then Jesus replies, “if you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children [τέκνους], how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (7:11). Thus, υἱός and τέκνον would function as synonyms.

involves “a very young child,” namely, an infant (cf. Matt 11:25).²² It seems that it is in a parallel structure with θηλάζω,²³ a word that describes “a baby feeding at the breast” (cf. 24:19).²⁴ In this sense, the παιδάς who are shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” may be understood in relation to the LXX’ quotation, which identifies them as little children (Table 3).

Narrative	Quotation from the LXX
The children (παιδάς) crying out in the temple (Matt 21:15)	“Out of the mouths of children [νηπίω] and infants [θηλαζόντων] you have prepared praise for yourself” (Matt 21:16)

Table 3: Narrative and Quotation from the Hebrew Bible in Matthew 21:14-16

3. Παῖς as Servant in the Gospel of Matthew

A reading of Matt 12:18 and 14:12 shows that παῖς may be understood as “servant,” which is based upon the text’s close relation to the Septuagint (LXX).

3.1 Παῖς in Matthew 12:18

In Matt 12:18 the implied author makes reference to the messianic fulfilment of Isa 42:1-4, a text that speaks of God’s chosen “servant” (Isa 42:1). The Hebrew word used by the MT is עַבְד (Isa 42:1).²⁵ This word is then translated by the LXX as παῖς. Matthew 12:18 is placed into the narrative unit of vv. 15-21 describing the ministry of Jesus (Matt 12:15-16), which finds its fulfilment in the words “spoken by the prophet Isaiah” (12:17 NJB). Thus, the παῖς mentioned in this chapter refers to Jesus defining him as servant.

Another detail that the implied reader may notice is that the formula quotation contains the personal pronoun παῖς μου, “my servant” (Matt

²² Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, 671. In classical Greek the word νήπιος was commonly used to describe children between one and ten years old. See Georg Bertram, “νήπιος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:912.

²³ Newman and Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, 648.

²⁴ Louw & Nida, 1:248.

²⁵ The term עַבְד commonly means “slave” or “servant” in the MT. Cf. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 774-775.

12:18; Is 42:1). The designation *παῖς μου*, always²⁶ refers to a servant in the LXX,²⁷ therefore, it seems that the reader may consider that the expression *παῖς μου* in itself may mean "my servant."

3.1 Παῖς in Matthew 12:18

In Matt 14:2, Herod the tetrarch tells his *παισῖν* that John Baptist had risen from the dead. The plural form of the word, linked to the fact that Herod is called tetrarch (14:1), may suggest that these *παισῖν* should be understood as servants and not sons. Also, the LXX usually uses *παισῖν* to refer to those who work for authorities.²⁸

4. Παῖς as Servant in the Centurion's Story

Based upon this analysis, it seems that the immediate literary and intertextual context defines the understanding of *παῖς* in the Gospel of Matthew either as boy or servant. In the case of the centurion's story (Matt 8:5-13), it is highly probable that *παῖς* should be understood as servant.

The narrative unit of the centurion's story is situated after the miracle of a man with leprosy (8:1-4) and before the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15). The centurion approaches Jesus requesting for the healing of his *παῖς* who was "lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress" (8:5-6). Although Jesus agrees to go with him, the centurion refuses and argues that just a word spoken by Jesus could heal his *παῖς* (8:7-8). The centurion explains that he is a man with authority, with soldiers under him, and with a *δοῦλος*, "servant," who obeys his orders (8:9). Then, after Jesus' words of praise regarding the faith of the centurion, the story ends saying that the *παῖς* "was healed in that very hour" (8:13; NIV).

²⁶ Cf. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 354.

²⁷ See LXX: Gen 18:17; 33:14; Lev 25:55; Num 14:24; Josh 1:7; 1 Kgs 21:6; 1 Chr 17:4; 2 Chr 2:7; Job 1:8; Isa 20:3; 22:20; 37:35; 41:8-9; 42:1, 19; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 49:6; 52:13; Jer 26:28; 33:5; 42:15; 51:4. In these cases *παῖς* is always a translation of the Hebrew word *עֶבֶד*, which means "servant." See MT: Gen 33:14; Lev 25:55; Num 14:24; Josh 1:7; 1 Kgs 20:6; 1 Chr 17:4; 2 Chr 2:7; Job 1:8; Isa 20:3; 22:20; 37:35; 41:8-9; 42:1, 19; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 49:6; 52:13; Jer 46:28; 26:5; 35:15; 44:4. The only exception is Gen 18:17. This is because the MT does mention, as LXX does, the word *עֶבֶד* in this text

²⁸ See examples in LXX of *παῖς* as a "person of servile status" in Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 520. The word *παῖς* is a translation of the same Hebrew noun *עֶבֶד*, namely, servant. Cf. LXX Gen 41:10, 37-38; 50:2; 1 Sam 18:22; 25:10; 28:7; 2 Sam 15:14; 1 Kgs 3:15; 21:12, 31 [20:12, 31; MT]; 2 Chr 2:14; 35:23; Neh 9:10. See also Jer 43:31 [36:31 MT], 44:2 [37:32 MT]).

In this narrative unit the only internal synonym provided by the narrative is the word δούλος, "slave" (8:9).²⁹ The reader notices that unlike the allusion to the soldiers, who are described as being under the centurion's authority, the δούλος is presented grammatically as a possession of the centurion, who calls him τῷ δούλῳ μου, "my slave." In addition, the soldiers are grammatically described in plural, while the δούλος is presented in singular. This same linguistic element is repeated when the centurion refers to his παις twice as ὁ παις μου (8:6, 8). Accordingly, this narrative detail would indicate that both words are synonyms, allowing the reader to establish that the centurion's παις is not only a servant but also specifically a slave (Table 4).³⁰

Another element that suggests to the reader that παις could be understood as servant is again the grammatical way in which this is presented. As mentioned before, in the LXX the expression παις μου always means "my servant," which could allow the reader to interpret the phrase παις μου of the centurion's story in this same way.³¹

παις	δούλος
"Lord, my servant [παις μου] is lying at home paralyzed" (Matt 8:6; singular)	Soldiers (στρατιώτας) (Matt 8:9; plural)
"Speak the word, and my servant [παις μου] will be healed" (Matt 8:8; singular)	"to my servant [τῷ δούλῳ μου], 'Do this,' and he does it." (Matt 8:9 NJB; singular)

Table 4: *Παις μου and δούλω μου in Matthew 8:5-13*

²⁹ Cf. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (JSNTSup 204; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 584, no. 27, who holds that "the reference to 'slave' in v. 9 suggests servant."

³⁰ Cf. Robert Horton Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 142. Cf. Ivor Powell, *Matthew's Majestic Gospel: A Distinctively Different Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986), 150, who suggests that παις refers to a "slave boy." Although this opinion is interesting, it is based on a parallel reading of Luke 7:1-10 (where the Gospel renders "slave"), not exclusively in Matthew's Gospel.

³¹ Cf. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 354.

5. Conclusion

It seems that the meaning of παῖς as servant in the centurion's story is based on narrative connections, which may also be presented in other pericopes in which the word παῖς appears. In addition, the reader of the narrative may have been influenced by the meaning provided by the LXX, which commonly defines παῖς as servant. In view of this and from a narrative perspective, the best translation of the noun παῖς in the centurion's story would be "servant," not "boy."