

The Beatitudes: Is There Anything New Here? **By Mark E Moore, PhD**

Often Jesus' words are read as if they were pearls dropped from the very throne of God—divine, therefore unique and unparalleled. This romantically winsome notion, unfortunately, fails to recognize that our famed Rabbi was Jewish, living amidst the grueling realities of the first-century Roman world. This essay will attempt to put Jesus on the literary map, so to speak. In particular, it will examine the Beatitudes to see what kind of literature and ideologies Jesus leaned against in order to construct his Sermon on the Mount. First, we will look at Beatitudes as a literary genre—where they are found and what they say. Second, we will dissect the eight beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12, looking for ideological parallels. Third, we will zero in on the eighth beatitude, the only one Jesus commented upon. Finally, we will draw some conclusions about how this reading impacts one's understanding and interpretation of the entire sermon.

Beatitudes as a Genre

In Hebrew literature, beatitudes had their own definition and syntax. The Greek word μακάριος or its Hebrew equivalent אֲשֵׁרִי means “fortunate” or “enviable”.¹ In the Greek philosophic tradition it implied successful living—achieving wealth, children, a good wife, etc. Such fortune allowed one to live above the needs and pain of normal human existence. Hence, μακάριος is a particular attributed of the gods who lived above the fray of human frailty. Aristotle summed it up nicely, “But to be happy [μακάριος] and to live blissfully and finely may consist chiefly in three

¹ Cf. W. Zimmerli, “Die Seligpreisungen der Bergpredigt und das Alte Testament,” pages 8–26 in *Donum gentilicium: New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

things deemed to be most desirable: some people say that Wisdom [prudence] is the greatest good, others Goodness [virtue or excellence] and others Pleasure” (*Eudemean Ethics* 1214a.30–34).²

In the Hebrew tradition, μακάριος leans more toward God’s covenant blessing.³ The word itself is used sixty-seven times in the LXX.⁴ Except for the latest uses in 4 Maccabees (7:15, 22; 10:15; 17:18; 18:9) and Daniel (12:12), it is exclusively in a poetic form. That is, the word virtually always begins the sentence or strophe followed by the predicate and the person who is considered blessed along with the cause of the blessing. This formula is virtually unanimous in the Hebrew uses and virtually absent in the Greek philosophic tradition. Clearly, Jesus was speaking as a Jew in the Beatitudes, not as a Hellenistic philosopher (no great surprise here).

The cause of μακάριος/אֲשֶׁר־י revolves around seven constellations in the Old Testament (and Apocrypha). (1) As in the Greek philosophic tradition, **earthly pleasures bring blessing**: Bearing children (Gen 30:13, 2x; Psa 127:5 [126:5]), a good wife or friends (Sir 25:8–9; 26:1), remaining

² The Greek traditions finds μακάριος in several clusters (this is a fractional sampling of the five-hundred uses of μακάριος or its derivatives in the *Persens* data base): (1) **Marriage**: Plutarch, *Moralia* 1.21; Euripides, *Trojan Women* 301–400 (though Epictetus, *Dissertations* 2.18.15 and 4.9.7 argues this fate can turn against you); and **children**: Plutarch, *Antonius* 35.2; Euripides, *Iphigenia* IA 625–30. However, Epictetus mocks the hedonists who imagine in vain that pleasure leads to μακάριος, Diogenes, *Lives* 10.6. (2) **Living above human need**, whether the gods (Plutarch, *De Stoicorum* 40; *De communibus* 32) or humans (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 28.1). (3) **Leisure**: Plutarch, *Apoph.* 3.41.; *Lycurgus* 24.2.; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 2.55.4; **Absence of fear**: Plutarch, *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* 30; Polybius, *Histories* 18.15.8; or **Freedom from physical pain or suffering**: Epictetus, *Dissertations* 2.1.33; Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum* 20; *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* 7. Plato believed this could only be attained after death, *Epinomis* 973c. In *Praecepta* 1.32, he mocks the blessed life of peace that ignores the civic duty in times of distress. (4) **Wealth**: Polybius, *Histories* 28.21.3; Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 12.3; *Coriolanus* 10.1; Plutarch, *Cato Maior* 18.3; but wealth can also bring sorrow and giving it up can bring happiness: Plutarch, *De cupiditate divitiarum* 1 & 8. (5) **Wisdom**: Plutarch, *Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus*, 15; *De communibus* 20; *Numa* 20.7.; *Ad principem ineruditum* 1.5; Plato, *Laws* 711e; *Republic* 335e. **Education**: Plutarch, *Caesar* 55.1; *Consolatio ad uxorem* 9; or **Truth**: Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 1. (6) *Good reputation*: Plutarch, *Brutus* 52.3.; *Coriolanus* 4.2; Appian, *Civil Wars* 2.91. It is noteworthy how often Plato, Plutarch, and the Stoic authors caution that the traditional sources of μακάριος can, in fact, work against one’s ultimate happiness.

³ Cf. F. Hauck, “μακάριος,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhard Kittel et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:362–70.

⁴ Excluding Isa 31:9 LXX as an obvious misreading of the Hebrew אֲשֶׁר־י for אֲשֶׁר־י. Of those 67 uses, the lion’s share are in Psalms (25x, 37%) and the Apocrypha (26x, 39%). To these one could add μακαριστός in Prov 14:21; 16:20; 29:18.

unscathed by gossip (Sir 28:19), vengeance against enemies (Psa 137:8–9 [136:8–9]), and according to Philo, a good education (*Spec. Laws* 4.115; he shows his Hellenistic colors here). (2) **Israel** is blessed because Yahweh saved her (Deut 33:29; Psa 33:12 [Psa 32:12]; 144:15 [143:15]; 146:5 [145:5]; Bar 4:4; Ps Sol 5:16; 6:1; 10:1; 17:44; 18:6; Isa 30:18; 32:20). In fact, any individual disciplined by Yahweh (Job 5:17) and whose sins are forgiven (Psa 32:1–2 [31:1–2]; 94:12 [93:12]) is blessed. (3) Hence also those who **worship** Yahweh are blessed (Tobit 13:14 [13:15–16, 2x], following curses, v. 12 [cf. Luke 6:20–26]; Psa 34:8 [33:9]; 40:4 [39:5]; 65:4 [64:5]; 84:4–5, 12 [83:5–6, 13]; 89:15 [88:16]; 112:1 [111:1]; 128:1–2 [127:1–2]; Sir 34:17 [15]; Ps Sol 4:23; Bar 4:4). (4) Blessed are those who show **benevolence** to the poor [very different from being poor!] (Psa 41:1 [40:2]) and do **justice** (Psa 106:3 [105:3]). Thus, the land is blessed when the rulers are just (Ecc. 10:17). (5) In general, the **righteous** are blessed (Psa 1:1; 2:12; 119:1–2 [118:1–2]; Prov 20:7; Sir 14:1–2; 31:8; 48:11; Isa 56:2; Wis 3:3; 4 Macc 18:9). (6) So too are those who gain wisdom (1 Kgs 10:8 [3 Kgs 10:8] 2x; 2 Chron 9:7, 2x; Prov 3:13; 8:34; Sir 14:20; 50:28; cf. Philo, *On Dreams* 1.50). (7) The final constellation of blessing revolves around those who are persecuted. This is the latest, by necessity, for the concept could not arise until the evolution of the afterlife in Jewish thought. Once Jewish writers and sages began discourse on life after death a post-mortem promise could be made to those who suffer for God in this present life. These specific texts will be explored below.

This concludes our survey of the word itself, its common poetic formula, as well as the causes of the blessing. The *Beatitudes*, however, are more complex because this literary device involves the stringing together of multiple *μακάριοι* into a collection. Jesus was not the first to use this device. Somewhere around 180 B.C.E. the author of Sirach (14:20–27) wrote these words: “Happy [*μακάριος*] is the person who meditates on wisdom and reasons intelligently, who reflects in

his heart on her ways and ponders her secrets...”⁵ Though the word “Happy/Blessed” is only used once, what follows is a catalogue of personal characteristics of the fortunate person. It is not quite the Beatitudes of Jesus, but it is heading in that direction. A few chapters later we read:

I can think of nine whom I would call blessed [ἐμακάροισα], and a tenth my tongue proclaims: a man who can rejoice in his children; a man who lives to see the downfall of his foes. Happy [μακάροτος] the man who lives with a sensible wife, and the one who does not plow with ox and ass together. [Happy is] the one who does not sin with the tongue, and the one who has not served an inferior. Happy [μακάροτος] is the one who finds a friend, and the one who speaks to attentive listeners. How great is the one who finds wisdom! But none is superior to the one who fears the Lord. (Sir 25:7–10)

Here the word μακάροτος is used only twice, but a catalogue of character is nonetheless developed. The tale of Tobit, recorded about the same time as Sirach, is closer to Jesus’ version in 13:14: “*Happy* [μακάριοι] are those who love you, [and *happy* are] those who rejoice [χαίρω] in your prosperity. *Happy* [μακάριοι] also are all people who grieve with you because of your afflictions; for they will rejoice [χαίρω] with you and witness all your glory forever.”⁶ This repetition, especially in a poetic context of character traits, mirrors the genre Jesus used to introduce the Sermon on the Mount. Even closer is the first-century B.C.E. document found at Qumran (4Q525, frags. 2 ii & 3.1):

[Blank] *Blessed* [אַשְׁרֵי] are those who adhere to her laws, and do not adhere
2 to perverted paths. [Blank] *Bles[sed]* [אַשְׁרֵי] are those who rejoice in her, and do not burst
out in paths of folly. [Blank] *Blessed* [אַשְׁרֵי] are those who search for her

⁵ All Scriptures are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

⁶ The word μακάριοι is used twice (not three times as in the English translation) but it is paralleled with the word χαίρω creating a poetic rhythm.

3 with pure hands, and do not pursue her with a treacherous [heart.] [Blank] *Blessed* [אשרי] is
the man who attains Wisdom, [Blank] and walks
4 in the law of the Most High.⁷

Here we have a quadruple repetition of “Blessed” [אשרי] with a poetic parallelism juxtaposing the
righteous behavior with its antithetical wicked behavior. This is strikingly like Luke’s version of
Jesus’ Beatitudes in which he has four blessings and four curses (Luke 6:20–26).⁸

A final example shows the full development of the Beatitudes as a literary device. Enoch
(42:6–14) probably postdates Jesus’ speech by a generation or more (c. 70–90 C.E.):

Blessed is he who fears God and serves him. And you, my children, learn to bring gifts to
the Lord, that you may enjoy life.

Blessed is he who judges a judgment justly to the widow and orphan and helps everyone that
is wronged, clothing the naked with garments, and to the hungry giving bread.

Blessed is he who turns back from the changeable path and walks along the straight path.

Blessed is he who sows the seeds of righteousness, for he shall reap sevenfold.

Blessed is he in whom is truth, that he may speak truth to his neighbor.

Blessed is he in whose mouth is mercy and gentleness.

Blessed is he who understands the Lord’s works and glorifies the Lord God.

⁷ Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, vol. 2, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (Translations)* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997-1998), 1053. For other *Makarisms* in the DSS, cf. B. T. Viviano, “Beatitudes Found Among Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov/Dec 1992): 53–55, 66.

⁸ C.M. Tucket deals comprehensively with the evidence that both versions go back to a common Q source, “The Beatitudes: A Source-Critical Study,” *NovT* 25/3 (1983): 193–207; cf. R. Geulich, “The Matthean Beatitudes: ‘Entrance-Requirements’ or Eschatological Blessings?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95/3 (1976): 415–34 and J. W. Thompson, “The Background and Function of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke,” *Restoration Quarterly* 41/2 (1999): 109–16. There is evidence that the original Q form had both the blessings and curses but that the Matthean redaction deliberately catered to a more OT form whereas Lucan redaction was more at home in a Greek environment; cf. Hubert Frankmölle, “Die Makarismen (Mt 5, 1–12; Lk 6, 20–23),” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 15/1 (1971), 52–75.

These examples show that Jesus' use of Beatitudes as a literary device is not unique. Moreover, his development of eight in a row matches Enoch and 4Q525, the closest chronological parallels. In short, Jesus did not invent the genre—it was a recognizable poetic feature of his literary landscape. What is unique, however, is what follows the predicate—*why* they were blessed. None of the extant *makarisms* suggest one is blessed because he is poor, or mourning, or debased. The only possible exception is the martyr tradition in 4 Maccabees and Daniel 12:12 (which will be taken up below). Jesus' hearers would most certainly be taken aback by such a string of “upside-down” blessings. As Hauck puts it, “A clear difference from the Gk. beatitudes is that all secular goods and values are now completely subsidiary to the one supreme good, the kingdom of God.”⁹ In Jesus' rendition, “blessing” is not from this earthly life, but from the inheritance promised those presently suffering. This striking feature could be called the “theology of reversal.” Those who would normally be viewed as cursed wind up on the right side of Divine justice. While the “theology of reversal” is new to the Beatitudes, it was completely new in Jewish prophetic discourse. It was, to be sure, a narrow path, but recognizable nonetheless. To this tradition we now turn.

Parallels to the Beatitudes

Jesus' Beatitudes tapped into a well-worn path in Jewish prophetic literature.¹⁰ It was not the broad road, to be sure, but neither was it Frost's newly forged trail. There is ample evidence that many Jewish teachers and philosophers taught that God's intervention would turn sorrow on its head, flipping the social totem pole upside down.¹¹

⁹ Hauck, 368.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Lapide, “The Beatitudes,” *Emmanuel* 92 (1986): 322–29, 55.

¹¹ M. A. Powell's thesis is compelling, that the unenviable lot of those in the first four Beatitudes is reversed, not merely by God, but by those who carry out God's justice in the last four Beatitudes; cf. “Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” *CBQ* 58/3 (1996): 460–79. This reversal theme was also common coin in Cynic and Stoic literature, even in connection with the word *μακάριος* (see

Beatitude	Parallel Sayings
<p>Poor in Spirit</p> <p>Cf. Psa 34:6; Prov 29:23; by contrast <i>Str-B</i> 1:190-93 shows the disdain later rabbis felt for the <i>Am-ha-aretz</i>.</p>	<p>Isa 61:1, “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.”</p> <p>Prov 16:19, “It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.”</p> <p>Isa 57:15, “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”</p> <p><i>Tg. Psa</i> 34:19, “The Lord is near to the broken hearted, and he saves the lowly of spirit.”</p> <p><i>m. ’Abot</i> 4:10 “Be humble before everybody.”</p>
<p>Mourn</p> <p>Isa 61:1-2 may be in the background of the beatitudes, particularly as it predicts the Messiah.</p>	<p>Isa 61:2-3, “to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”</p>
<p>Meek</p> <p>Cf. <i>Jub.</i> 32:18-19</p>	<p>Psa 37:11, “But the meek shall inherit the land...”</p> <p><i>Enoch</i> 5:7, “But for the elect there shall be light and joy and peace, and they shall inherit the earth.”</p>
<p>Hunger for righteousness</p> <p>Notice the heavy emphasis on social justice, cf. Psa 9:8, 33:5; Isa 1:21, 27; 5:7, 16; 11:4; 16:5; 28:17; 32:1, 16; 33:5; 59:9, 14; Jer 9:24; Hos 2:19; Amos 5:7; 6:17; Hab 1:4; Zeph 3:5</p>	<p>1 Kgs 10:9, “Blessed be the LORD your God ... he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness.”</p> <p>Psa 89:14, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne.”</p> <p>Job 29:14, “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban.”</p> <p>Prov 29:7, “The righteous know the rights of the poor.”</p> <p>Isa 9:7, “He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness.”</p> <p>Amos 5:24, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an</p>

footnote 2 above); Cf. H. D. Betz, “Die Makarismen der Bergpredigt,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 75 (1978): 1–19.

	ever-flowing stream.”
<p>Merciful</p> <p>Cf. <i>y. B. Qam.</i> 8:6; <i>b. Šabb</i> 151b</p>	<p>In the OT only God is merciful. This is reflected in James 2:13, “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” See also the parable of the unmerciful servant, Matt 18:21–35 as well as the Lord’s prayer petition Matt 6:14.</p> <p><i>t. B. Qam.</i> 9:30, “So long as you are merciful, He will have mercy on you.”</p> <p><i>Sifré Deut.</i> 13:18 § 96, “Rabban Gamaliel b. Rabbi says, “So long as you show mercy to others, Heaven shows mercy to you. If you do not show mercy to others, Heaven shows you no mercy.”</p>
<p>Pure in Heart</p> <p>Job 4:17; Psa 51:10; Prov 20:9 speak of the difficulty of attaining a pure heart.</p>	<p>Psa 24:4-5, “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...They will receive blessing from the LORD.”</p> <p>Psa 73:1, “Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.”</p> <p>Prov 22:11, “Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech will have the king as a friend.”</p>
<p>Peacemakers</p> <p>[The OT concept is primarily of national security due to Israel’s fidelity to Yahweh. For Christians and Rabbis it typically applied to interpersonal relationships.]</p>	<p>Num 25:12, “I hereby grant him my covenant of peace.”</p> <p>Prov 16:7, “When the ways of people please the LORD, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.”</p> <p>Ezek 34:25, “I will make with them a covenant of peace.” (cf. 37:26)</p> <p>Rom 14:19, “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” (cf. Heb 12:14)</p> <p><i>’Abot R. Nat.</i> 23a “Pursuing Peace. What does this mean? It teaches that a man should pursue peace in Israel among all men.”</p>
<p>Persecuted</p> <p>Cf. Dan 12:12</p>	<p>Psa 119:157, Many are my persecutors and my adversaries, yet I do not swerve from your decrees.”</p> <p>4 Macc 7:22, It is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue.</p> <p>4 Macc 10:15, By the blessed death of my brothers, by the eternal destruction of the tyrant, and by the everlasting life of the pious, I will not renounce our noble family ties.</p> <p>4 Macc 17:17–18, The tyrant himself and all his council marveled at their endurance, because of which they now stand before the divine throne and live the life of eternal blessedness.</p>

	<p><i>b. B. Qam. 93a</i>, “R. Abbahu said: A man should always strive to be rather of the persecuted than of the persecutors as there is none among the birds more persecuted than doves and pigeons, and yet Scripture made them alone eligible for the altar.”</p> <p><i>b. Ber. 61b</i>, “Blessed are you, R. Akiba, that you are destined for the life of the world to come” [as he was accepting martyrdom c. 135 C.E.].</p>
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Clearly, each individual Beatitude has a kissin’ cousin somewhere in Jewish literature. What Jesus offered, therefore, was not unheard of. It was odd to find so much reversal talk in one small poem. It was shockingly clever to (mis)use the *gattung* of Beatitudes as a delivery system for his theology of reversal. But the fact remains that the content of each Beatitude was echoed elsewhere in Judaism. The real shock—the unprecedented novelty—is not in the Beatitudes but in Jesus’ final comment about the final Beatitude.

Blessed are the Persecuted

As one can see above, Jesus’ Beatitudes tapped into the minority tradition of “fortune for the unfortunate.” Or put in Jewish terms: Happy are the *anawim* (the poor, unfortunate, ostracized, or beleaguered). Though counter-cultural, it cannot claim to be unique (except that he strung them together in the Beatitudes, a genre reserved heretofore for the standard praise of the enviable of this earth). What is unique, however, is his comment on the final beatitude—“Blessed are the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” None would argue with the Beatitude, particularly living under Roman rule in the shadow of the glorious Maccabean revolt. Any Jew that faught valiantly and died nobly for the glory of YHWH could expect a monument or at least an enduring literary memorial.

In Jesus’ explanation, however, he made an unprecedented move. He said they would be blessed if they suffered *for him!* “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (5:11). In order to grasp the import of Jesus’

claim, one needs to fast forward to the year 135 C.E. during the downhill slide of the Bar Kockbah revolt. The Talmud recounts the tale of the great Rabbi Aqiba facing execution (*b. Ber.* 61b). He considered himself fortunate to die as a martyr at the precise time of the recitation of the *Shemah*. According to the tradition, he prolonged the word “One” [*Ehad*] so that he could die with the declaration of the singleness of God on his lips. Hence, he died loving the Lord with all his strength. Thus it was recorded of him:

He said to him, “**Happy** [אשרי] are you, Aqiba, because you were arrested on account of teachings of Torah. Woe is Pappos, who was arrested on account of nonsense.” The hour at which they brought R. Aqiba out to be put to death was the time for reciting the Shema. They were combing his flesh with iron combs while he was accepting upon himself [in the recitation of the Shema] the yoke of the **Kingdom of Heaven**.¹²

The comparison with Jesus’ words in the eighth beatitude could hardly be thicker: *Happy* is the one *persecuted* for he receives the *Kingdom of Heaven*. The contrast, however, is equally striking. Aqiba died for the confession of Yahweh as One. Jesus’ followers are called to suffer for the confession of his name! Since this is the only one of the beatitudes Jesus commented upon, it must have struck his hearers with particular force. Everything Jesus said up to that point was familiar to their Jewish ears even if it was uncommonly framed in Beatitudes. This final exhortation, however, must have struck them as bodacious bordering on blasphemous. Was Jesus really arrogating to himself the role of Yahweh? After all, God was the only one worth suffering for. Indeed, he alone could promise the good fortune of the Kingdom of Heaven to those who died for his honor.

As noted above, the late uses of *μακάριος* in Maccabees and Daniel are the only ones to incorporate this “theology of reversal” as applied to persecution. In an encomium on the

¹² Jacob Neusner, vol. 1, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 419.

martyrdom of Eleazar, our author concludes with these words, “It is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue.” Though articulated in the vernacular of a Greek philosopher (paradoxically), it is clear that Eleazar refused to eat Antiochus’ pork because it violated the Law of God: “We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives by the divine law, think that there is no compulsion more powerful than our obedience to the law” (4 Macc 5:16). The same can be said of the seven brothers who refused to eat the pork in order to save their lives. The third brother offered Antiochus his tongue to be cut out after offering the tyrant this tongue lashing: “By the blessed [μακάριος] death of my brothers, by the eternal destruction of the tyrant, and by the everlasting life of the pious, I will not renounce our noble family ties” (4 Macc 10:15). Such resilience eventually impressed Epiphanes, at least according to the record of 4 Maccabees 17:17–18, “The tyrant himself and all his council marveled at their endurance, because of which they now stand before the divine throne and live the life of eternal blessedness.” Daniel, demonstrates the same eschatology but sets it in the colorful garb of apocalyptic: “Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days” (12:12).

What becomes clear is this: (1) *Μακάριος* could now be used for suffering because an eschatological reward had “evolved.” (2) “Blessed are the Persecuted” was common coin in 4 Maccabees and Daniel. (3) The blessing comes because of fidelity to Yahweh’s command. If this much can be granted, then one can only imagine the consternation of Jesus’ audience when he claimed to be worth suffering for. Such an assertion is tantamount to being God’s equal, or perhaps more accurately, the embodiment of God’s Torah. Little wonder Jesus followed the Beatitudes with six extensions to Mosaic legislation with the words: “You’ve heard that it was said...but I say” (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

Implications for Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount

There are two major implications that can be drawn from this data. The first concerns Jesus' self-awareness and outrageous self-assertion. The second concerns the social status of suffering disciples.

Implication #1. There can be little doubt that the Beatitudes captured the undivided attention of Jesus' audience. They set an agenda, not only for the Sermon, but for the core of the Kingdom of God: This world is about to be turned on its head! Winners will be losers, the dead will live, the poor will be rich, and those who pick up a cross will attain resurrection. This is enough to take one's breath away. Nonetheless, Jesus' parenthetical comment at the tail end of this mind-blowing poem is the greatest shock of all. This new world order would be effected through God's envoy, Yahweh's functional equivalent standing right in front of them.

Lest this seem like too much of a stretch, the reader is reminded that Jesus' sermon ends with an equally self-arrogating claim that his words were the very foundations of life. Since Jesus' metaphor of the building on a rock has been turned into a children's ditty, it is easy to miss the shock it would have held for his hearers. To be sure, they did not miss the implications. Matthew notes their response: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:28-29). Jesus, the living Torah, trumps Mosaic legislation in chapter 5. Hence, the bookends of the sermon are striking claims that Jesus stands as the very Word of God.

One can hardly miss this implication in Jesus' repetitive claim in chapter 5: Moses said, but I say. He exalted himself to a position above Moses, or at least to a role of Moses' editor/interpreter. A brief perusal of the Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) shows how important dialogue was among the rabbis. Even the greats like Hillel and Shammai could contravene one another. But none would dare pit themselves against their founding father. Moses' words were the very words of God; his law was immutable. One might rightly ask, "Who does this guy think he is?" But Jesus has already given the

answer in the Beatitudes. His opinions are on par with God's and those who suffer for them are on par with the martyrs of YHWH.

Implication #2. As a point in fact, the μακάριος word group is not merely speaking about the *condition* of the individual but about that person's *position* in society. It is part of the honor/shame culture of the first century world.¹³ Jesus' explanation of the final Beatitude is not merely autobiographical; it reconfigures the scale of honor so that the totem pole of values is flipped on its head. This idiosyncratic worldview was adopted and promoted by Jesus' followers, particularly in the area of persecution. Hence, those shamed in persecution considered it a special privilege, even a badge of divine honor.

Some have suggested this "new teaching" had its genesis in the Hellenistic Church of the late first-century.¹⁴ This, however, is unnecessary. The *Sitz im Leben* of the sermon in general and the Beatitudes in particular is Jewish.¹⁵ Furthermore, the idiosyncratic renovation of the poetic form was replicated throughout the New Testament. The *Gattung* of Beatitude in Matthew 5:11–12 contains four elements: (a) Μακάριος, (b) suffering, (c) χαίρετε ("rejoice"), and (d) eschatological reward.¹⁶ These same elements can be found in 1 Peter 4:13–14: "[C] But rejoice insofar as you are [B] sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy [D] when his glory is revealed. [B] If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are [A] blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you." James 1:2 & 12 spread the elements across a broader context:

¹³ The connection of μακάριος to the honor/shame culture was happily introduced to me by K. C. Hanson, "How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and Reproaches," *Semeia* 68 (1994): 81–111.

¹⁴ E.g., K. Kertelge, "Selig, die verfolgt werden um der Gerechtigkeit willen," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 16 (1987): 97–106.

¹⁵ Cf. G. L. Stevens, "Understanding the Sermon on the Mount: Its Rabbinic and New Testament Context," *The Theological Educator* 46 (1992): 83–95.

¹⁶ This four-part template comes from Bernard Estrada, "The Last Beatitude: Joy in Suffering," *Biblica* 91/2 (2010): 194.

“[B] Whenever you face trials of any kind, [C] consider it nothing but joy, ... [A] Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. [D] Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

In short, it looks like Jesus taught a novel precept that gained traction with later Christian teachers and prophets, precisely because its genesis was the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. If Kertelge wants to argue that the Beatitudes reflect a late-first-century milieu, he must explain (a) the improbability of Jesus making such a statement, and (b) what creative genius came up with such a novel thought, couched in an unsuspecting poetic package, and (c) why it became a normative expression in the rest of the NT.

Hence, one can make three assertions about the comments on the final beatitude. First, the most likely scenario is that they stem from the historical Jesus. This transformational ideology, packaged in a traditional poetic form, certainly comes from Jesus singular genius than a later redactor. Second, Jesus is making a bodacious self-assertion. His claim to be the Torah of God would have had striking implication not lost on his listeners. It shows up in the extension of Mosaic legislation as well as the metaphor with which he concludes the sermon. Finally, this upside down world where the persecuted rejoice was Jesus' vision turned to reality through his disciples. Those loyal to Jesus as God's very voice found themselves fulfilling the prophecy of the eighth Beatitude. So is there anything new in the Beatitudes? Well, at least in the last one, there is a whole new world if Jesus is God's Word.