
Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani

Volume 11, Nomor 1 (Oktober 2026)

ISSN 2541-3937 (print), 2541-3945 (online)

<https://www.sttintheos.ac.id/e-journal/index.php/dunamis>

DOI: 10.30648/dun.v11i1.2297

Submitted: 8 April 2026	Accepted: 8 Juni 2026	Published: 26 Juli 2026
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**Messianism as Religious Nationalism:
Postcolonial Hermeneutics on Matthew 25:31–46**

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Abstract

Messianism in the Judeo-Christian tradition is closely related to the collective experience of political subjugation and socio-economic marginalization, particularly under Roman rule after the Jewish–Roman War (66–70 CE). This study analyzes Matthew 25:31–46 within this context using a postcolonial hermeneutic approach, interpreting messianism as a form of religious nationalism. The study presents two main findings. First, the figure of the “Son of Man” represents a form of religious nationalism that functions as symbolic resistance to Roman imperial authority. Second, the identification of the Messiah with “the least of my brothers” reflects religious nationalism as a form of national solidarity rooted in the lived experience of the oppressed. This study contributes to postcolonial biblical interpretation by highlighting how the text constructs collective identity and resistance within a colonized community. It also offers implications for Matthean studies by reframing the passage beyond ethical and eschatological readings toward its ideological and socio-political dimensions.

Keywords: ideology; Jewish–Roman War; socio-politic; Son of Man; the oppressed

INTRODUCTION

Messianism in early Christianity cannot be separated from the socio-political realities of Roman imperial domination, particularly in the aftermath of the Jewish–Roman War (66–70 CE). Within this context of destruction, displacement, and identity crisis, the Gospel of Matthew emerges not only as a theological document but also as a narrative shaped by the collective experience of a marginalized Jewish-Christian community negotiating its identity under imperial power.

Scholarly discussions of Matthew have increasingly emphasized its engagement with imperial ideology. Warren Carter, for example, argues that Matthew's Gospel reflects and contests Roman imperial power by rearticulating sovereignty, authority, and justice within a theological framework centered on God's reign rather than Caesar's empire.¹ This perspective opens important avenues for interpreting key Matthean texts, including Matthew 25:31–46, as sites where theological claims intersect with political and ideological concerns.

Within the Gospel of Matthew, messianism is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition

and scriptural fulfillment. As noted by Donald Guthrie, Matthew emphasizes the continuity between Jesus and Jewish messianic expectations, particularly through extensive use of Old Testament quotations.² Similarly, Richard Beaton highlights the centrality of Isaianic themes in shaping Matthean Christology,³ while Paul J. Achtemeier underscores the integration of Israel's theological heritage into the identity of the early church.⁴ These studies demonstrate that Matthew constructs Jesus as a messianic figure embedded within Jewish theological traditions, yet responding to new historical challenges.

At the same time, previous studies on Matthew 25:31–46 have predominantly approached the passage from ethical, eschatological, or contextual perspectives. Ethical readings emphasize social justice and care for the marginalized, while theological approaches focus on divine judgment and revelation. Contextual and inculturation approaches, particularly in Asian scholarship, have explored the relevance of the text within local cultural frameworks. However, these approaches often overlook the broader

¹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 28.; Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 74.

² Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 126.

³ Richard Beaton, *Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211.

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 27.

socio-political dynamics of Roman imperialism and the role of the text in constructing collective identity in a colonized context.⁵

This study addresses this gap by proposing a postcolonial hermeneutic reading of Matthew 25:31–46, interpreting messianism as a form of religious nationalism. While the concept of nationalism is typically associated with modernity, scholars such as Anthony D. Smith have demonstrated that pre-modern forms of collective identity and ethno-symbolic solidarity can function analogously to nationalism.⁶ Drawing on this perspective, this study employs the concept heuristically to analyze how Matthew's Gospel constructs a form of collective identity rooted in shared suffering, religious symbolism, and resistance to imperial domination.

By situating Matthew 25:31–46 within the post-war context and reading it through a postcolonial lens, this study argues that the text articulates messianism not only as an eschatological hope but also as

an ideological discourse that fosters collective identity, solidarity, and resistance among a colonized people. In doing so, it contributes to both Matthean studies and postcolonial biblical interpretation by foregrounding the intersection of theology, power, and identity in early Christian texts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a postcolonial hermeneutic approach as its primary analytical framework, focusing on how power, domination, and resistance are constructed and negotiated within biblical texts.⁷ While postcolonial hermeneutics provides the theoretical lens, this study operationalizes the method through a series of concrete analytical steps to ensure methodological clarity and reproducibility.

First, the study establishes the historical-socio-political context of the text, particularly the aftermath of the Jewish–Roman War (66–70 CE). This step draws on primary historical sources such as Josephus

⁵ Herman Adi Basri, "Peran Gereja Dalam Melaksanakan Keadilan Sosial: Refleksi Etika Sosial Dalam Injil Matius 25:35-40," *Sabda: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 6, no. 2 (November 13, 2025): 289–312, <https://doi.org/10.55097/SABDA.V6I2.221>; Carel Hot Asi Siburian and Asigor Parongna Sitanggang, "Wajah Allah Yang Tersembunyi Disingkapkan: Etika Eskatologis Matius 25:31-46 Sebagai Locus Allah Yang Tersembunyi Dalam Menyatakan Diri-Nya," *GEMA TEOLOGIKA: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual Dan Filsafat Keilahian* 9, no. 1 (April 22, 2024): 15–34, <https://doi.org/10.21460/GEMA.2024.91.1097>; Krueger Kristanto Tumiwa, "Memanusiakan Manusia"

(2016), 43.; S. Hutagalung Hendriks, A. and Jemmy Carter Najoan, "Eudaimonism: Juxtaposition to the Concept of the Last Judgment on Matthew 25: 31-46," *Jurnal Jaffray* 20, no. 2 (2022).

⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 171.

⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 456.; Jeremy Punt, *Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: Reframing Paul* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015), 54.

and Suetonius,⁸ as well as secondary scholarship, to reconstruct the conditions of trauma, displacement, and imperial domination experienced by Jewish communities.

Second, the study conducts a textual and lexical analysis of Matthew 25:31–46 based on the Greek text (Nestle-Aland 28). Key terms such as *ho huios tou anthrōpou* (“Son of Man”) and *ta ethnē* (“the nations”) are examined using standard lexicons (e.g., BDAG) to identify their semantic range and theological significance within the passage.

Third, the study applies postcolonial interpretive categories, focusing on three main analytical dimensions: power and sovereignty → how authority is represented (e.g., throne imagery, judgment motifs); resistance and subversion → how imperial ideology is challenged or reconfigured; collective identity and solidarity → how the text constructs communal belonging, particularly through identification with “the least.” These categories function as heuristic tools to interpret how the text engages with imperial structures and articulates alternative forms of authority and identity.

Fourth, the study integrates historical context and textual analysis through a

process of interpretive triangulation. The historical reconstruction informs the reading of the text, while the textual analysis provides evidence for how theological claims may reflect and respond to imperial realities.

Finally, the concept of religious nationalism is employed as an analytical category to synthesize these findings. While recognizing that nationalism is a modern concept, this study uses it heuristically, following Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolic approach, to analyze pre-modern forms of collective identity shaped by shared history, religious symbols, and experiences of domination.

Through these methodological steps, this study aims to provide a systematic and reproducible interpretation of Matthew 25: 31–46 that integrates postcolonial theory, historical context, and close textual analysis. Therefore, the term “religious nationalism” is not used to imply the existence of a modern nation-state, but rather as an analytical category to describe pre-modern forms of collective identity shaped by shared history, religious symbolism, and experiences of domination.

⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 427.; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*,

trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 64.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical-Socio-Political Context

The Gospel of Matthew is widely understood to have been written within a Jewish-Christian context in the late first century, most likely between 70 and 90 CE, following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. This dating is supported by major Matthean scholars who argue that the Gospel reflects tensions between emerging Christian communities and the synagogue, as well as the broader pressures of Roman imperial domination.⁹ Bart Ehrman similarly argues that the Gospel reflects post-70 CE realities, particularly in its engagement with the destruction of Jerusalem and its aftermath.¹⁰

The aftermath of the Jewish–Roman War (66–70 CE) was marked by large-scale destruction, displacement, and the reconfiguration of Jewish identity under imperial rule. As documented by Josephus, the war resulted in massive loss of life, enslavement, and the destruction of Jerusalem, creating a context of collective trauma that shaped the worldview of Jewish communities in the late first century.¹¹

⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. 3* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 399.; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 88.; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 298.

Within this socio-political setting, Matthew's Gospel can be read not only as a theological narrative but also as a response to imperial domination, in which questions of authority, identity, and divine justice are rearticulated in light of Roman power. As Warren Carter argues, Matthew's narrative redefines sovereignty by locating ultimate authority in God rather than in the Roman emperor.¹²

Exegetical Analysis

The “Son of Man”: Authority and Imperial Subversion

In Matthew 25:31, the figure of the Son of Man (*ho huios tou anthrōpou*) is depicted as seated on a throne of glory and exercising judgment over “all the nations” (*panta ta ethnē*). This imagery draws on apocalyptic traditions, particularly Daniel 7:13–14, where a human-like figure receives authority, glory, and dominion from God.

The interpretation of the “Son of Man” has been widely debated in scholarship. Maurice Casey understands the expression primarily as an Aramaic idiom with non-titular usage, whereas Morna Hooker and Delbert Burkett argue for a more de-

¹⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 180.

¹¹ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 428.

¹² Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, 81.

veloped apocalyptic and christological meaning.¹³ This diversity of interpretations indicates that the Matthean usage must be read within its literary and historical context rather than reduced to a single definition.

From a lexical perspective, the term *ho huios tou anthrōpou* carries a semantic range that includes both a generic human reference and a specialized apocalyptic figure, depending on context.¹⁴ In Matthew 25:31–46, the latter is clearly emphasized through the association with enthronement, judgment, and universal authority.

In the Roman imperial context, such imagery is highly significant. The emperor was commonly associated with universal rule, judicial authority, and divine legitimacy. By attributing these functions to the Son of Man, the Matthean text reconfigures imperial categories and transfers them to a divine agent.¹⁵

From a postcolonial perspective, this reconfiguration can be interpreted as a form of symbolic resistance. The text constructs an alternative vision of sovereignty in which imperial power is relativized and subjected to divine judgment. The nations are no

longer objects governed by Rome but are instead accountable to the Son of Man, thereby subverting the ideological foundations of imperial domination. This interpretation does not claim direct authorial intent, but rather offers a heuristic reading that highlights how the text may function within a context shaped by imperial domination.

The “I”: Identification and Solidarity

The Matthean text repeatedly emphasizes the identification of the Son of Man with “the least of these” (Matt 25:35–40). Rather than relying on a fixed numerical count of first-person expressions, which remains textually debated, the analysis focuses on the rhetorical and theological pattern of identification within the passage.¹⁶ The repeated statements—“I was hungry,” “I was thirsty,” “I was a stranger,” “I was naked,” “I was sick,” and “I was in prison”—function as a rhetorical device that establishes a strong identification between the Son of Man and those who suffer. This identification is not merely symbolic but theological, as the treatment of the marginalized becomes the criterion for eschatological judgment.

¹³ Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 20.; Maurice Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: SPCK, 1979), 21.; Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19.

¹⁴ Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian*

Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “υἱός,” 1002.

¹⁵ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, 30.

¹⁶ *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

In the historical context following the Jewish–Roman War, these conditions reflect concrete social realities, including displacement, poverty, imprisonment, and enslavement. Josephus’ accounts of the war describe precisely such experiences among Jewish populations under Roman rule.¹⁷ Thus, the identification of the Messiah with the suffering can be understood as a form of collective representation, in which the experiences of a colonized people are internalized within a theological framework. This supports the interpretation of the passage as articulating not only an ethical demand but also a mode of communal identity grounded in shared suffering.

Religious Nationalism and Theological-Political Meaning

The concept of religious nationalism provides a useful analytical lens for interpreting these findings. While nationalism is typically associated with modern political developments, Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolic approach allows for the identification of pre-modern forms of collective identity shaped by shared history, symbols, and experiences of crisis.¹⁸ This understanding is also consistent with broader discussions of religious nationalism as a

form of identity construction that integrates religious symbolism and political meaning.¹⁹ In this context, Matthew 25:31–46 can be read as the formation of a collective identity rooted in religious symbolism and communal solidarity, because the passage not only presents individual eschatological judgment, but also builds a communal awareness of who belongs to the community of the Kingdom of God.

The collective identity of Matthew’s community was shaped through ethical action toward the “least of our brethren,” so that social solidarity became a primary marker of loyalty to the King—the Son of Man. In the Roman colonial context, the practice of compassion toward the hungry, the foreign, the sick, and the oppressed represented not only an individual moral obligation but also a counter-imperial act that challenged the empire’s logic of domination, patronage, and social exclusion. Thus, the religious symbolism of the Son of Man judging the nations serves as a unifying narrative for a community living amidst colonial crisis and social marginalization. The practice of caring for vulnerable groups becomes a means of forming an alternative community that distinguishes Matthew’s community from the exploitative power structures of

¹⁷ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, 172–76.

¹⁸ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 173.

¹⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 110.

the Roman Empire. Therefore, Matthew 25:31–46 speaks not only of personal salvation but also represents a vision of a new social order that builds collective solidarity based on religious values and social justice.

It was in the context of the post-Jewish-Roman War crisis of 70 AD that the symbolism of the Son of Man acquired even stronger socio-political significance. Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish community experienced a multidimensional crisis encompassing the collapse of its religious center, social disintegration, and the loss of the political and cultural symbols that had sustained its collective identity. This situation prompted Matthew's community to build a new identity foundation capable of providing both religious legitimacy and historical hope amidst the trauma of Roman colonialism. In this context, the figure of the Son of Man not only represented divine authority but also became a symbolic center that consolidated communal solidarity and reconstructed post-crisis identity through a vision of the Kingdom of God that favors the marginalized.

As an eschatological figure who comes with glory and power to judge the nations, the Son of Man represents a re-

versal of the dominance of the Roman Empire, which at that time claimed political and religious supremacy. By positioning the Son of Man as universal judge, Matthew's Gospel implicitly deconstructs the absolute claims of the empire and transfers supreme authority to a messianic figure who sides with the poor and oppressed. In this sense, Matthew's community no longer builds its identity based on political affiliation with Rome or the centrality of the Temple, but rather through an ethical relationship with the Son of Man who is present among the “least of our brethren.” Therefore, loyalty to the Son of Man is manifested through social solidarity and the practice of compassion, thus making Matthew's community emerge as an alternative religious community that challenges the exploitative imperial order.

At the same time, this interpretation must be situated within broader scholarly debates. Ulrich Luz, for example, interprets the passage in a more universalistic sense, emphasizing ethical responsibility toward all marginalized people rather than a specifically national or communal framework.²⁰ This perspective challenges readings that restrict the referent of “the least of these” to a particular group. However, a postcolonial reading does not necessarily exclude uni-

²⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 325.

versal ethical implications but instead highlights how such ethics emerge from a historically situated context of suffering, marginalization, and identity formation. The text thus operates on both levels: it articulates a universal ethical vision while simultaneously reflecting the historical experience of a specific community under imperial domination.

CONCLUSION

These findings have broader implications for biblical and theological studies. They suggest that texts such as Matthew 25:31–46 should not be read solely in abstract ethical or eschatological terms, but also as historically situated responses to power, violence, and social dislocation. Furthermore, this approach opens space for contextual readings—particularly in post-colonial and Global South settings—where questions of identity, oppression, and solidarity remain central. In this way, the study highlights the ongoing relevance of biblical texts as resources for interpreting the relationship between theology, power, and community in contexts marked by inequality and domination.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express his gratitude for the contributions of those who have been actively involved in this research,

especially Prof. Yusak B. Setyawan, Prof. Izak Lattu and Dr. Suwanto Adi.

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