
We Need More *Splanchna* In Our Lives!

Reading Empathy in Matthew 9:36

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Introduction

Unlike many contemporary Christian podcasters today, Jesus is the epitome of empathy and compassion in Matthew's Gospel for whom contemporary Jesus-followers must emulate. Conservative commentators understand toxic empathy as an empathy that left-wingers use to manipulate well-meaning believers into adopting sinful, argumentative, and political positions by exploiting their natural religious tendency to care for others. As I listen to conservative Christian commentator and white Christian nationalist adjacent podcaster Allie Beth Stuckey,¹ toxic empathy seems to only concern itself with the sexuality and/or genitalia between someone's legs. For example, toxic empathy concerns itself with whether a fetus currently occupies a womb or whether a person possessing a womb has the right to abortion care or not. Toxic empathy concerns itself with the immigration status of undocumented members of society. Toxic empathy is not concerned with whether the current president of the United States raped a 14-year-old girl, nor whether the United States incinerates 500 tons of food that could actually save the lives of 1.5 million impoverished children, or if the business practices of a campground could have saved the precious lives of children swept away in a flood.² Toxic empathy, according to Stuckey, is:

... allowing feeling how they feel to lead you to justify what they are doing—which happens in abortion and the gender debate and the sexuality debate and the justice debate and the immigration debate. Because we

1. Allie B. Stuckey is the author of *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassions*. While Stuckey does not call herself a Christian nationalist, she seemingly embraces the nomenclature by stating on her Instagram page, that “‘Christian Nationalism’ is just a label used to silence Christian conservatives and discourage them from standing by their beliefs.”

2. On the Trump Administration incinerating 500 tons of food, see Hana Kiro's article “The Trump Administration is About to Incinerate 500 Tons of Emergency Food,” in *The Atlantic*, July 14, 2025. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2025/07/usaid-emergency-food-incinerate-trump/683532/>. Regarding the Camp Mystic campground, see Laura Sullivan's “Camp Mystic asked to remove buildings from government flood maps despite risk,” [https://www.npr.org/2025/07/13/nx-s1-5465635/camp-mystic-flood-maps-fema-texas-flooding#:~:text=The%20camp%20requested%20that%20FEMA,owners%20to%20carry%20flood%20insurance](https://www.npr.org/2025/07/13/nx-s1-5465635/camp-mystic-flood-maps-fema-texas-flooding#:~:text=The%20camp%20requested%20that%20FEMA,owners%20to%20carry%20flood%20insurance.).

What the world needs now is more *splanchna* embodied in the lives of contemporary Jesus-followers. And if you have not already guessed, our *splanchna* is the way that our inner empathy and compassions reverberate and show forth on the outside through our actions toward other people.

feel so deeply for this one purported victim, we say, well, maybe deportation is wrong, or maybe I should affirm this person's stated gender, even though it mismatches their biology, or maybe I should affirm the right to have an abortion because I feel so deeply for this person's plight. That is when your empathy has led you in a bad direction and has turned toxic.³

I wonder if Stuckey has read Matthew 9:36 which states “When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion (*splanchna*) for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (NRSV). The Matthean Gospel writer highlights Jesus' *splanchna* in this text! Pondering Jesus' *splanchna*, I argue that what the world needs now is more *splanchna* embodied in the lives of contemporary Jesus-followers. And if you have not already guessed, our *splanchna* is the way that our inner empathy and compassions reverberate and show forth on the outside through our actions toward other people. *Splanchna* is vastly different from what Stuckey describes as toxic empathy. Moreover, *splanchna*, as a concept, is antithetical to anything which embraces white Christian nationalism.

3. Ross Douthat, “Is Toxic Empathy Pulling Christians to the Left? How Allie Beth Stuckey is Holding the Right.” *New York Times*, July 15, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/17/opinion/interesting-times-allie-beth-stuckey.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Defining white Christian nationalism

White Christian nationalism's "deep story" goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were "traditional" Christians, who based the nation's founding documents on "Christian principles." The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful, and the nation has a special role to play in God's plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from "un-American" influences both inside and outside our borders.⁴

In the description above, writers Gorski and Perry borrow the "deep story" idea from sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's 2016 book titled *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Essentially, white working-class Americans in rural Louisiana hold to a "deep story" that entails the idea that they had been waiting patiently for the American dream to show up in their lives, but they saw immigrants and minorities cutting the line. Because of such occurrences, they were essentially losing any empathy for other people and placing their "faith" in political leaders such as Donald Trump.

The political worldview of white Christian nationalism dictates the embrace of "proper" stances on marriage and family, Israel, religious liberty, abortion, and immigration. This also means that a connection to a faith that is related to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ becomes usurped by a faith in a whiteness that emerges from a white Christian nationalist identity. Some have even argued that Jesus is too woke! The goal of white Christian nationalism is to make the United States a theocratic nation that re-inscribes patriarchy and heteronormativity. Therefore, for me, as a Womanist New Testament scholar, I must return, again and again, to the Scriptures to read them anew and fresh to combat such ideals that remove empathy and make it toxic.

Engaging Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel was probably written between 80 and 90 CE perhaps in Antioch of Syria. While we do not know whether an actual "Matthew" wrote the Gospel, convention names this Gospel Matthew because of the apostle named in Matt 9:9 and 10:3. The earliest comment that has been preserved about attributing the Gospel to a "Matthew" comes from Papias in the early second century and preserved in Eusebius, HE 5.8.2. Therefore, I will use Matthew by convention even though we can never be certain that a "Matthew" wrote this Gospel.⁵

This Gospel is thought to be the most "Jewish" Gospel since it has traditionally been compartmentalized into five discourses which some scholars understand to be based on the idea of the

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Pentateuch.⁶ After beginning with the infancy narrative (1:1-2:23), Jesus begins his ministry at 3:1 and continues it until 4:25. Thereafter, the Gospel records Jesus' first discourse commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29). After some healings and the gathering of his followers between 8:1 through 9:34, Jesus begins his second discourse at 9:35 which continues through 11:1. Jesus' teaching here is the focus of our foray into the subject of toxic empathy.

Engaging the text

36 Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἐσπλαγχνίσθη περὶ αὐτῶν,*
ὅτι ἦσαν ἐσκυλμένοι καὶ ἐρριμμένοι ὥσπερ πρόβατα
μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα.

And observing the crowds, he (Jesus) had *splanchna* concerning them, because they were harassed and thrown down like sheep not having a shepherd.

I often tell students, "I cannot teach you *splanchna*, but I can show you where it is in the biblical text." My point is that there are moments in many old King James translations of this term where "bowels of mercy" was a connotation for the noun form of *splanchna*. Since many of us do not speak in "thou" and "thine" which is normative of the King James version, I often must provide students a different connotation for "bowels of mercy." Put more contextually for today's age, I ask students to remember their first romantic love. Prompting further, I ask them if they remember feeling "butterflies" in their stomach when their special someone walked into a room? I then explain that such deep feelings in your body represent *splanchna*.

As a noun, *splanchna* only appears in the plural in ancient writings, referring to the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys of an animal that is sacrificed. For example, in the Septuagint, specifically in a Maccabean context, the word represents a feeding on the innards of a sacrifice. In general, when sacrifices were eaten by the ones who sacrificed at the beginning of their feast, they ate the heart,

4. Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4, Kindle.

5. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 2.

6. Matthew 5:1-7:29, 9:35-11:1, 13:1-52; 18:1-35; and 24:1-26:1.

lungs, liver, and kidneys at the beginning of their feasts. The meaning of *splanchna* is not limited to the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, however. Metaphorically, *splanchna* connotes “the seat of the feelings, affections, esp. of anger, anxiety, love, and pity.”

What we witness in Matt 9:36 is Jesus expressing the verbal form of *splanchna*. Contemporary readers of Jesus’ emotions must ask what the complexity of such a verb means for us, morally and ethically. Why does Jesus emote such a feeling for the crowds so deeply within his body? Why does Jesus emote such a feeling for the crowds within his guts? I would argue that the following description of the experiences of the crowds describes the demand for Jesus’ highly emotive *splanchna* language.

White Christian nationalists: The great harassers

The Gospel writer uses two verbs to describe the experiences of the crowds. The first verb is *skullo*. This verb connotes the idea of being wearied, harassed, troubled, bothered, or annoyed. The people are dejected. What I find interesting about the writer’s construction of the description is the use of the perfect, passive, participle to evidence this harassment. In a passive construction, we do not know who is doing the harassing of the crowds. The implicit understanding of the audience would be that the Roman imperial forces are the ones harassing the crowds and dejecting them.

The United States cosplays as the Roman Empire in several ways that dejects its own constituents. When I consider the economics of the Roman Empire and the United States, there are similarities. Historians note that the Roman Empire uses “a massive system of exploitation of the great majority by the ruling classes.”⁷ Similarly, the United States of America in 2017 passed a new tax code that granted tax benefits to the wealthiest. Economists note that households with incomes in the top 1 percent received an average tax cut of more than \$60,000 in 2025.⁸ Both systems are thoroughly parasitic economic systems that feed off the impoverished.

The Roman Empire and the American Empire also have the idea of military supremacy in common. Currently, the United States has about 800 military bases around the globe.⁹ The American Empire has been tied to both corporate interests, as the United States wants to control oil production, and regime changes as a result of their desire for oil across the globe.¹⁰ The Roman Empire had the global military supremacy similar to the United States policy of military and globalizing capitalism and extraction.

7. See Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 7.

8. See Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/the-2017-trump-tax-law-was-skewed-to-the-rich-expensive-and-failed-to-deliver>

9. See David Vine. *Base nation: How U.S. military bases abroad harm America and the world*. (Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

10. See the conversation on “neo-conservatives” in Monte Pearson. *Perils of Empire: The Roman Republic and the American Republic*. 1st ed. (New York: Algora Pub., 2008).

Both the American Empire and the Roman Empire have distinct ideologies that serve to legitimate and naturalize the dominant social order. In both contexts, there are fictions that each try to represent. Both Empires lie about benevolence, paternalism, and authority. Moreover, the ways that they do this are focused in the figure of a single, wise, “caring” autocratic ruler who becomes the standard of masculinity.

Let me be clear: while I am not trying to make a one-to-one correspondence between the Empires, I am trying to take seriously the resemblance of the Empires. Both the American Empire and the Roman Empire have distinct ideologies that serve to legitimate and naturalize the dominant social order. In both contexts, there are fictions that each try to represent. Both Empires lie about benevolence, paternalism, and authority.¹¹ Moreover, the ways that they do this are focused in the figure of a single, wise, “caring” autocratic ruler who becomes the standard of masculinity.¹² In the Empire the ruler is the Emperor Nero for Matthew and Trump for white Christian nationalism. The ruler serves to mask the exploitative dynamics of the economic order.

White Christian nationalists: The ones who “other” and animalize

The second verb that is interesting to read is *ripto*. This verb connotes two ideas. The first idea is the sense of being thrown down forcefully. Again, this verb is a perfect, passive, participle thus the reader must imply who is actually “doing” the verb to the crowds. The second idea is the connotation of the sheep lying down as helpless because they have no shepherd. In fact, either connotation could be correct. However, I have chosen to think of the passage as a “throwing down” with a bit more violent force again because of the context.

11. An excellent book on this subject is Monte Pearson’s *Perils of Empire: The Roman Republic and the American Republic*. 1st ed. (New York: Algora Pub., 2008).

12. See Elliott, *The Arrogance of the Nations*, 7. Also, for Greco-Roman masculinity, I would recommend Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195325324.001.0001>.

Many scholars believe that Jesus focuses on the religious leaders of the day who are not leading the crowds in Palestine sufficiently. These leaders do not show the compassion and empathy that Jesus feels for the crowds. These leaders do not identify their situation with the crowds because they are retainers for the Roman Empire. These leaders do not act for the benefit of the crowds but act for the benefit of themselves and their positions. Perhaps the Gospel writer channels Ezekiel when he charges that the “shepherds” have ruled with “force and harshness,” feeding and clothing themselves but not the sheep (34:2-3, 8). They have not “strengthened the weak ... healed the sick ... bound up the injured ... brought back the strayed ... sought the lost ... but with force and harshness you ruled them” (34:4, 17-19). By invoking the Ezekiel tradition, the Gospel writer, perhaps, suggests that those Judean rulers who have aligned themselves with imperial forces act contrary to the will of God.¹³

Another option could be that the Gospel writer sharply criticizes the kings and emperors of the Roman Empire. The term “shepherds” is a standard metaphor for those rulers in both the Hebrew biblical tradition (see 2 Sam 5:2) and also in the Greek and Roman traditions (see Philo, Leg. 44, 52; Dio Chrysostom *Discourse 1.13*). Quoting Homer, the orator Dio Chrysostom reminds Trajan that the emperor is a “shepherd of peoples” who is to “protect flocks, not . . . to slaughter, butcher and skin them” (*Discourse 4.43-44*).¹⁴ Compassion involves identifying so much with the situation of others that one is prepared to act for their benefit.¹⁵ Such an idea is vastly different from our ideas of compassion today. Oftentimes, in our contemporary contexts, we think that as long as we do not harm others, we are doing well. However, the idea of shepherding is also about protection.

The problem with white Christian nationalism is that the concept of toxic empathy provides no protection to those outside of white Christian nationalism. White Christian nationalists do further harm by “animalizing” the “other” whatever their identity may be. For example, when Donald Trump launched his campaign for the presidency in 2015, he suggested that Mexico was not sending its best people but was instead sending rapists and murders. This language morphed into the idea that a particular gang identified as MS13 were “animals.” Since language is fluid, Trump’s use of animalistic language developed into calling all undocumented immigrants “animals.”

The ways that white Christian nationalism tends to “other” and animalize those different that them has detrimental consequences. White Christian nationalists’ “othering” and animalization of those different than them enables their destruction. The Matthean writer’s focus is different. Jesus has compassion and empathy for

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crowds whom he and the biblical tradition liken to sheep without a shepherd. White Christian nationalism likens the “other” to “animals” meant for disposal. The lack of compassion and empathy is the stark difference between the two.

Conclusion

In the Matthean text, Jesus prays for more people to embody emotions similar to those that he shows. Jesus’ *splanchna* shines through in this text with his prayer. Unlike white Christian nationalists, Jesus is the epitome of empathy and compassion who does not adhere to an understanding of toxic empathy in his ministry. Moreover, as an agent of God, Jesus constantly feeds and heals people, especially children.

In a world that is overrun by white Christian nationalists, there needs to be a group of people who rise up with the same type of *splanchna* that Jesus exhibits. The ones exhibiting Jesus’ example of *splanchna* must be the ones who counter the hate that is spewed by white Christian nationalists to all the oppressed people of the earth including, but not limited to, our LGBTQIA+ siblings, black and brown bodies affected by racism and militarized police violence, and our undocumented friends facing dire immigration circumstances. As we demonstrate Jesus’ *splanchna* in today’s world, our prayer should be to embody such goodness and blessings to all of God’s children. Thus, the call on our lives and the call of contemporary Christians today is to embody more Jesus *splanchna*. Will we answer that call?

13. See Warren Carter, “Matthew Negotiates the Roman Empire” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Kindle Locations 1578-1583). Kindle Edition.

14. Carter, “Matthew Negotiates the Roman Empire” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Kindle Locations 1583-1588). Kindle Edition.

15. Carter, “Matthew Negotiates the Roman Empire.”