



An Introduction to Matthew in Lectionary Year A

Matthew's gospel comes first in the New Testament because, known as "the Gospel of the Church," it was considered by the early Christians to be the most important book in the Bible. In many ways, Matthew does in one volume what Luke does in two: tells the saving story of Jesus, while providing an abundance of material intended to serve as instruction for those who continue the mission of Christ after Easter. True to its position in the canon, Matthew has exerted an outsize influence on the life and mission of the church.

Content and context

Matthew's gospel tells the story of Jesus, with emphasis on his teaching and on his mission as the Son of God who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (5:17), call sinners (9:13), build a church (16:18), and give his life as a ransom for many (20:28). This story is almost two thousand years old, but it still offers much that allows for engagement with contemporary issues and concerns. It provides a compelling portrait of a world (or at least of a countercultural community) in which compassion and mercy are prime virtues (5:7; 23:23), forgiveness and justice are top priorities (18:21-22; 23:23), children are valued (18:5), outcasts are accepted (9:11-13; 25:31-46), enemies are loved (5:43-44), and all people are treated with unselfish benevolence (7:12). Further, Matthew's gospel offers a realistic but inspiring appraisal of human potential: steering a middle path between Mark's "disciples as failures" and Luke's "disciples as heroes," Matthew tells a story of how fallible people "of little faith" can nevertheless be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; 5:13-14).

The social setting for Matthew's gospel was a fairly prosperous urban community marked by cultural diversity. It was, thus, a far cry from the social setting of Jesus himself (a rural, peasant environment). The evangelist edited the traditions he received in ways that would make the material more relevant to his context, something often evident when Matthean texts are compared with parallel passages in the other gospels. For example, in Mark 6:8, Jesus tells his disciples to leave their copper (NRSVue, "money") at home, but in Matthew 10:9, he tells them to leave their copper, silver, and gold at home.

Matthew himself and the base membership of his church were certainly Jewish. Indeed, most scholars now say it is more accurate to regard them as "Christian Jews" than as "Jewish

Christians." They probably thought that Christians, like Pharisees or Sadducees, were one party within the parent religion of Judaism. As such, they argued and quarreled with the Pharisees and Sadducees in the same manner that these groups argued and quarreled with each other.

But there was a difference. These Christian Jews were committed to "mak[ing] disciples of all nations" (28:19), and a significant number of gentiles were now being baptized. Thus, numerical growth implied cultural and ethnic diversity, which in turn implied challenges to what were often regarded as sacred traditions. Some members were obviously troubled by what they thought was being lost. We should not be surprised to find that Matthew's gospel incorporates material that addresses this tension between tradition and innovation, but it is noteworthy that it does so in ways that advocate for both. On the one hand, Jesus insists that "not one letter" will be lost from the sacred traditions of Israel (5:18). On the other hand, he says (repeatedly), "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . ." (5:21-47). What is going on? Matthew's preference is not to play tradition and innovation off against each other or to accept any compromise that dilutes one at the expense of the other. Rather he demonstrates a paradoxical uncompromising, absolute commitment to both tradition and innovation. A leader trained for the kingdom of heaven, Matthew's Jesus says, is able to both keep what is old and accept what is new (13:52).

This gospel is cognizant of evil, which comes to expression in words and deeds of various characters: religious leaders, political tyrants, spiritual demons, and sometimes even Jesus' own disciples (16:23). By tracing the lines of opposition that assail Jesus as he goes about God's work, we may come to a deeper understanding of the nature of evil: it tends to be hypocritical, masquerading as good (23:27-28); it involves unwitting self-deception, failing to recognize its own duplicity (15:14; 23:16-22); it perverts what would be good, ignoring motives or outcomes (6:2, 5, 16); and so on. Finally, in the ironic resolution of the Passion narrative, the reader learns something else about evil: God triumphs over evil, even when evil succeeds at doing its worst.

Jewish representation

One issue of particular sensitivity in using Matthew's gospel in study and preaching is the manner in which it represents

the Jewish people, particularly their leaders. Time and again throughout the next year, we will encounter lectionary year A texts that portray prominent Jewish figures in a bad light. Jesus calls the Jewish leaders a “brood of vipers” (12:34; 23:33) and views them as “evil” (9:4; 12:34; 16:4). He indicates that they represent the devil, not God (13:24-30, 36-43, esp. v. 39; cf. 15:13). Jesus tells these leaders that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from [them]” (21:43), and he says that people from other nations will enter the kingdom of heaven, “while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness” (8:12). In one chilling verse, Matthew presents “the [Jewish] people as a whole” calling for Jesus’ death and saying, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (27:25). Throughout the centuries, this verse has been quoted by anti-Semitic groups who wished to label Jewish people “Christ-killers” and portray them as cursed by God.

Nevertheless, no other gospel emphasizes the Jewish matrix for Christianity or insists on its preservation as much as this one (see 10:5; 15:24; 17:24-27; 23:2-3). Matthew no doubt viewed disputes between Christians and Pharisees as an intra-Jewish matter, carried out with a vehemence typical of sibling rivalry. As such, he presents Jesus’ harsh words as analogous to those of other prophets who accused Israel of all sorts of sins and shortcomings without questioning the fundamental identity of that nation as God’s chosen people. Further, literary critics recognize that Matthew uses opponents of Jesus as foils for making points that transcend historical representation. Many of the characters in Matthew’s story are “flat characters,” embodying only one or two basic traits; in this way they are not like the real flesh-and-blood people on whom they might be based. The Pharisees who are characters in this story are hypocrites—and almost nothing else. In reality, it seems unlikely that all Pharisees at the time of Jesus were hypocrites, or that any of them were hypocrites all the time. Still, for rhetorical purposes, Matthew allows the Pharisees in his story to personify a particular vice: hypocrisy essentially becomes a character in the story. As a result, if we read Matthew in order to learn about first-century Pharisees, we may be misled or disappointed, but if we read Matthew to learn about hypocrisy, we may be treated to some rewarding insights.

Where God can be found

Matthew presents Jesus as Messiah, as Lord, and as Son of Man, but most important of all, he presents Jesus as the Son of God. For Matthew, this means Jesus is the one in whom God is uniquely present and through whom God is made manifest in the world. We may note that certain human characteristics of Jesus get played down. Matthew tends to avoid attributing emotions to Jesus (compare Mark 10:14 to Matt. 19:14) or even presenting Jesus as asking questions (compare Mark 9:33-37 to Matt. 18:1-4).

What we might call Matthew’s “Christology” is developed pastorally, in response to the fundamental question “Where is God to be found?” Matthew’s gospel offers a threefold response to that question. First, Matthew wants to say that God is present in Jesus. When Jesus is born, Matthew can say, “God is with us” (1:23), and as the story develops, people of all sorts worship Jesus (2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17; the Greek word used in all of these verses is *proskyneō*, the same word used in 4:10 to designate the sort of devotion that should only be offered to God).

Second, Matthew affirms that Jesus is present in the church. The last verse of the gospel records Jesus saying, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). Matthew recognizes the literal or physical absence of Jesus (9:15; 26:11) but reduces its significance by insisting that Jesus remains present with his followers nonetheless (18:20; 25:31-46; 28:20).

Third, Matthew thinks the church is or must be present in the world. The “church” for Matthew is not a building or even a localized community, but a missionary movement. God’s mission was fulfilled in the world through the person of Jesus, and now it continues to be fulfilled through the people who embody the presence of Christ. The church may be called “the light of the world” in Matthew (5:14) in the same way Jesus is called “the light of the world” in other writings (John 8:12). The church is Jesus for Matthew, the living body of Christ making God present in our world just as Jesus did in his.

Ten Distinctive Characteristics of Matthew's Gospel

1. Matthew displays a penchant for organizational patterns (three sets of fourteen in 1:1-17, seven parables in chapter 13, five major speeches in the gospel as a whole).
2. Matthew exhibits a “doubling motif” according to which stories are sometimes repeated (12:38-42; 16:1-4) and characters occur in pairs (8:28-33; 20:29-34).
3. Matthew shows particular interest in “the Law”—that is, in the moral codes of the Old Testament and of first-century Judaism (see 5:17-48; 15:1-6; 19:3-9; 23:2-3).
4. The fulfillment of prophecy is an important theme (see the twelve “fulfillment citations”: 1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:14-15, 35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10).
5. Matthew's gospel is the only one that displays Jesus talking explicitly about “the church” (16:17-20; 18:15-18).
6. The disciple Peter receives special prominence in this gospel (14:28-31; 16:17-20; 17:24-27; 18:21-22).
7. Matthew is especially concerned about God's continuing relationship both to Jews (1:21; 10:6; 15:24; 27:15) and to gentiles (8:10-11; 24:14; 28:19).
8. Matthew's gospel seems to present an apocalyptic vision of the world that clearly divides things into spheres of divine or demonic influence (see 13:24-30, 36-43; 15:12-13).
9. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' identity as the Son of God (see 3:17; 4:3, 6; 16:16; 17:5; 21:37; 22:2; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54).
10. The presence of God is an overriding theological motif throughout this gospel (see 1:23; 10:40; 18:20; 23:21; 25:31-46; 28:20).

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