

Yesterday, Today And Forever: An Introduction To The Gospel of Matthew

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In this Lectureship we want to emphasize the relevance of Jesus for the new millennium by focusing upon the Gospel of Matthew. To reap the full benefit of what Matthew has to offer, we need to turn our minds back to the first-century world and look at this Gospel in its historical setting. In this paper I want to provide a brief introduction to the book that will help us to understand what the inspired apostle wished to say about Jesus to his original readers. As we will see, it was a message of timeless significance.

It is important that we look at Matthew's Gospel on its own terms, rather than always reading it in conjunction with Mark, Luke and John. A comparative or harmonizing analysis of the four Gospels can be a valuable study, but it does not reflect the means by which God chose to relate the story of Jesus. The life of Jesus was revealed through four separate documents, each one an independent work written to its own audience and telling the story of Jesus in its own way. By examining the Gospel of Matthew as a single, autonomous document we will be able to appreciate its unique social setting and the special lessons that it emphasizes.

Early Church tradition (2nd - 5th centuries) regarded this Gospel as the first of the four Gospels to be written, composed by the apostle Matthew for a Jewish-Christian audience. Modern liberal scholarship usually rejects these traditions and dismisses much of Matthew's data as unhistorical. This circumstance demands some attention before we proceed further.

MODERN SCHOLARSHIP AND THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The Synoptic Gospels And Literary Dependence

When scholars refer to the *synoptic problem* they are discussing the question of why the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) share so much common material, often even to the point of precise verbal agreement. Most scholars presume that the answer lies in a theory of *literary dependence*, i.e., that the synoptic writers in some way relied upon one another's works. While some scholars have theorized that Luke used Matthew as a source and that Mark later condensed Matthew and Luke (the *Griesbach Theory*), the more common view is the *Two-Source Theory* which is predicated upon the idea of Markan priority. According to this view, Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source and also a hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings (called "Q") that is supposed to have circulated in the initial decades of the Church's existence.

This presumption of literary dependence has had profound effects upon the direction of subsequent research. Since there are observable differences even within much of the parallel material of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, scholars must explain these differences within the parameters of their literary dependence model. If, for example, the Two-Source theory is correct, it demands that one ask, Why did Matthew and Luke alter Mark's material? And why do their alterations differ from one another? Liberal scholars answer these questions by positing that different theological viewpoints motivated each Gospel writer (e.g., Crossan xiii; Müller 157-73). The typical picture of Matthew's Gospel that emerges is that Matthew represents a parochial form of Christianity at odds with the Christianities of Mark and of Luke. Such a conclusion obviously runs counter to the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

Our faith in the inspiration of the Gospels is predicated upon the historicity of the data they present about Jesus' claims and confirmatory miracles. In and of itself, a theory of literary

dependence between the Synoptics does not discredit the historical reliability of their material, but it does tend to obscure the connection of this material to actual eyewitnesses, thereby diminishing its evidentiary value. This is one reason why modern scholarship has not looked kindly upon the historical reliability of the Gospel data. Liberal scholars say that the four Gospels contain varying degrees of legendary accretions and other non-historical information created to support Christian agendas. For example, many scholars regard Matthew's account of the flight to Egypt and Herod's slaughter of the infants as mere fictions, concocted to portray Jesus as a divinely blessed figure whose early life paralleled that of Moses (e.g., Brown 111-19; Allison 140-65).

Undergirding this liberal approach to the Gospels is an anti-supernaturalism bias. The miracles of Jesus are discounted from the outset as philosophically untenable. Or the veracity of Jesus' miracles is treated as essentially outside the realm of scientific historical investigation, an approach that enables scholars to skirt the impact that the reality of the miracles would have upon their liberal theories (e.g., Meier, *Marginal Jew* 2:511-15). Similarly, it is assumed that Jesus could not really have predicted the destruction of Jerusalem some forty years before it occurred, as the Synoptics allege (Matt. 22:7; 24:1ff; Mk. 13:1ff; Lk. 21:5ff). The Gospel writers have simply tried to enhance the aura of their religion's founder by ascribing to Him a supernatural prescience of Jerusalem's fall.

These naturalistic assumptions lead scholars to conclude that the process of the synoptic Gospels' composition could not have begun earlier than the time of the outbreak of the Jewish War with Rome (A.D. 66). The Gospel of Matthew is usually placed at the end of the process, about A.D. 85 (Powell 72). This would mean that Matthew's Gospel was written during the time when non-Christian Jews were attempting to refashion Judaism after the loss of the Temple, and so scholars see the Gospel as reflecting Jewish Christianity's late first-century struggle with

Formative Judaism (e.g., Overman; Davies and Allison). This setting is assumed by most current interpreters, the only major debate being whether the Matthean community was still a part of Judaic society (e.g., Saldarini) or already had broken ties with it (e.g., Luz).

Modern scholarship has turned the historical value of the Gospels upside-down! Liberal scholars believe that the Gospels tell us more about what was going on in Christian communities during the last decades of the first century than they tell us about the actual life of Jesus. I reject this low view of the historicity of the Gospel material and the anti-supernatural presupposition upon which it is based. I take seriously the Gospels' claim to record eyewitness data about Jesus. In my judgment the evidence for Jesus' miracles is more than credible, provided one does not reject a priori the possibility of miracles.

A linchpin of the non-historical view of the Gospels has been the assumption of literary dependence. Scarcely any attention is given to explaining how the mechanics of such redaction was performed; a literary relationship between the Synoptics is simply treated as a given (Mattila 199-216). I am not convinced of a need to propose a literary relationship of any kind between the synoptic Gospels. (See Eta Linnemann's blistering attack of literary dependence in *Is There A Synoptic Problem?*) Their similarity of material can be explained in another way. It is reliably reported that the apostolic witnesses, in the years after Jesus' resurrection, passed down their eyewitness reports of Jesus' life to the Judean Christian community (Acts 2:40; Luke 1:1-4). It is logical to posit that this material was communicated in the form of fairly standardized units of oral material that were easily memorized and taught to others. These units of material (*pericopes*) might even have been preserved in notebooks by disciples who were literate (Ellis 311-333; cf. Luke 1:1-2). This methodology would have provided the new, burgeoning Church with a basic

uniformity of information about Jesus' life and teachings at a time when there were, as yet, no formal Gospels for Christian use.

This theory explains the similarity of material in the synoptic Gospels. Though Matthew, Mark and Luke were independent writers, they all drew upon units of material from a common body of eyewitness data that had been handed down from Pentecost onward. This view also makes understandable the presence of differences in parallel pericopes from Gospel to Gospel and removes any grounds for concluding that there were doctrinal conflicts between the writers. If the synoptic writers utilized a common body of orally transmitted material, then great similarities between their accounts, along with some dissimilarities, is exactly what we would expect to see. I reject as unnecessary, therefore, any theory of literary dependence between the Synoptic Gospels. If this staple of modern scholarship is abandoned, then most liberal theories of the Gospel of Matthew come crashing down as well.

Authorship And Related Issues

Many scholars discount the early Church tradition that the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew. Some even claim that the actual author was not a Jew! This claim seems absurd on the face of it, given the Gospel's heavy use of the Old Testament, its many semitisms, and the fact that, unlike the other Gospels, it does not explain Jewish customs to the reader. All of these factors indicate that both author and audience were Jewish. Nevertheless, some scholars assert that the author was a Gentile writing for a Gentile-Christian community with heavy Judaic influences, and that he betrays his non-Jewishness in several places by making misstatements about Jewish society (e.g., Meier, *Vision* 20-23). For example, in 16:12 he speaks of "the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" as if he thinks that they were doctrinally unified groups. Also, in Matthew 21:2-5 he displays an ignorance of the mechanics of Hebrew poetry by giving an

interpretation of Zechariah 9:9 that assigns different meanings to two synonymous lines of poetry. The verse says that the king of Judah will come “mounted on a donkey; even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The author understands these parallel lines to be talking about not one animal, but two (a donkey and her foal) and he connects both animals with Jesus’ triumphal entry.

Such arguments do not stand up under close scrutiny. The Qumran Scrolls and the Rabbinic Literature frequently assign different interpretations to parallel lines of biblical poetry (e.g., *Damascus Document* 7:18ff; *Genesis Rabbah* 53:5). In *Genesis Rabbah* 98:9 the parallelism of 49:11 (the base-text for Zechariah 9:9) is interpreted as referring to two animals, just as Matthew interpreted the Zechariah passage. Should we conclude that the composers of these documents also were not Jewish?! Nor is it correct to think that the author of this Gospel was unaware of the doctrinal distinctiveness of the Pharisaic and Sadducean sects. If his language in 16:12 is to be pressed, he probably says “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” because the two sects had become united in their opposition to Jesus – which was the issue at hand.

Most scholars, therefore, will acknowledge that the person who wrote this Gospel was of Jewish ethnicity, but they still deny that he was the apostle Matthew. Having assumed the Two-Source theory of composition to be correct, they naturally find it difficult to believe that an apostle of Jesus would rely upon Mark, a non-apostle and non-eyewitness, for information about Jesus. Also, the theory of Markan priority, coupled with the view that the process of the synoptic Gospels’ composition could not have begun earlier than the outbreak of the Jewish War with Rome (A.D. 66), tends to push back the possible date of the Gospel of Matthew (in the minds of most scholars) to about A.D. 85. So late a date does not preclude the possibility that the apostle Matthew penned this document, but it is less likely that he would still have been alive. For these reasons, most scholars reject the early Church tradition of Matthean authorship.

What makes it easier to reject this tradition is a potentially problematic element within it. The earliest patristic statement of Matthean authorship is that of Papias, a disciple of John and overseer of the church at Hierapolis in the early second century. Eusebius (ca. 300) quotes Papias as having written (in a work which survives today only in fragments), “Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew dialect (*dialektō*), and everyone interpreted them as he was able” (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16). This statement was understood by later Christians to mean that Matthew’s Gospel was composed in Aramaic and various translations of it were made afterward. But the Gospel that we know today cannot be considered a translation of an Aramaic exemplar; it is almost certainly an original Greek composition (Carson 68f). One might surmise that the extant Gospel of Matthew was a second (Greek) composition of the apostle that he based upon an earlier Aramaic volume (Hiebert 53-56). But most scholars simply dismiss the statement of Papias as incorrect. So if Papias was wrong about Matthew having composed his Gospel in Aramaic, he may also have been wrong about the entire notion of Matthew’s connection with it, and early Christians familiar with Papias’ work could have perpetuated the mistake.

But a re-examination of the data is needed here. First of all, there is good reason to think that Papias’ statement has been misinterpreted. When he says that Matthew composed his Gospel in the Hebrew *dialektos*, Papias may mean only that Matthew employed the Jewish *style of writing*, not that he used the Jewish language. This interpretation can be defended on both linguistic and contextual grounds (McKnight 527; Carson 69-71). In any case, the tradition that the apostle Matthew wrote this Gospel is not only ubiquitous in the early Church, it is uncontested. The tradition is reinforced by the textual evidence of copious ancient copies of this document that consistently title it *Kata Matthaion*, “(The Gospel) According to Matthew” – evidence that goes back at least to the first half of the second century (Guthrie 33). One cannot reasonably conclude

that the idea of Matthean authorship arose in the post-apostolic Church solely because of Papias. Scholars who reject Matthean authorship have a hard time explaining how this supposedly mistaken idea could have pervaded the early Church so uniformly.

According to Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 185), Matthew wrote his Gospel at the time of Paul's imprisonment in Rome, placing it some time in the 60's, which is quite plausible (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Those who date the Gospel as late as the 80's do so primarily because of their liberal presuppositions, as discussed above. As to the location of Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience, we can do little more than offer guesses based on features of the text. Judea itself would seem to be ruled out by virtue of the fact that the document was composed in Greek and not Aramaic. Syria (perhaps Antioch specifically) is an attractive possibility, and one could also make a case for Galilee (Keener 41-42).

THE STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Attempts to discern the structure of Matthew's Gospel have been numerous and quite varied. Locating a definite outline is difficult because Matthew's material, though by no means arranged haphazardly, is nonetheless not organized with clearly expressed structural markers running consistently throughout the document. There is always a concern that modern interpreters may be forcing a framework upon the text that the author did not intend and the original readers would not have perceived.

Older interpreters commonly analyzed the sections of the Gospel *geographically*, understanding Matthew to be telling the story of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, on the outskirts of Galilee, and finally in Jerusalem (e.g., Allen lxiii-xv). More recent interpreters look for *literary markers* within the text as clues that the author is moving from one section to another (e.g., Kingsbury 7-37; Smith 544-551). Others look for *thematic patterns* between segments of material.

For example, chiasmic arrangements have been observed within portions of the Gospel (e.g., McClister), and some argue that the entire document shows this or a similar type of configuration (e.g., Heil). None of the above approaches to Matthew's structure has gained widespread acceptance. The analyses often seem arbitrary or forced, and even if at some points a pattern such as chiasm is observable, it may only be a rhetorical device and not an indicator of a broad documentary format.

The difficulties involved in ascertaining a definitive outline for Matthew's Gospel suggest that we should be cautious about focusing on a single feature as the key to unlocking Matthew's structure. Moreover, it may be a mistake to expect sharp transitions in the text. Perhaps we should think of the structure of this Gospel as "more like the flowing lines of a symphony than the fixed girders supporting a building" (Senior 36). With these caveats in mind, I offer the following simple outline as a guide to these "flowing lines" of Matthew's thought. This outline seems to me to capture the Gospel's basic movement without imposing an artificial framework upon the text.

1. PRELIMINARY EVENTS, 1:1 - 4:11
 - Jesus' Early Years
 - John the Baptist and Jesus
2. THE GALILEAN MINISTRY, 4:12 - 11:1
 - Jesus the Spiritual Teacher
 - Jesus the Miraculous Healer
3. OPPOSITION, 11:2 - 20:34
 - John's Execution Leads To Jesus' Withdrawal
 - The Multitudes Must Be Taught In Parables
 - Conflict With The Pharisees
 - The Issue of Jesus' Identity / The Transfiguration
 - Jesus Announces His Upcoming Rejection In Jerusalem
4. JERUSALEM: THE ULTIMATE OPPOSITION, 21:1 - 28:20
 - Approaching Jerusalem
 - At The Temple: Jesus Versus The Religious Leaders
 - Betrayal, Arrest, Trial, and Crucifixion
 - Jesus Is Resurrected And Appears In Galilee

Several things are notable about how Matthew has composed his Gospel. (1) The beginning section (“Preliminary Events”) and the final section (“Jerusalem: the Ultimate Opposition”) record events in a fairly chronological order. But the middle two sections (“Galilean Ministry” and “Opposition”) seem to present information in more of a topical fashion. (2) Once Matthew begins narrating the ministry of Jesus, he intersperses the narrative sections with five major discourses, each one ending with the set phrase, “When Jesus had finished [these words].”

Chs. 5-7	Instructions For The Disciples: Kingdom Righteousness
Ch. 10	Instructions For The Twelve Disciples: Apostolic Commission
Ch. 13	Parables For The Multitudes: The Nature Of The Kingdom
Ch. 18	Instructions For The Disciples: Relationships Within The Kingdom
Chs. 23-25	Woes Upon The Pharisees And Prediction Of Impending Judgment

These discourses coincide with the thematic movement of the narratives and emphasize the point that Jesus is the ultimate teacher of God's word. (3) Running throughout the Gospel are numerous quotations of Scripture that present Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. These fulfillment citations (which I will discuss in more detail later in this paper) coincide with the major themes of the Gospel as outlined above – reinforcing in my judgment the validity of the outline.

When we survey the contents of Matthew it becomes clear how strongly the idea of opposition to Jesus operates in the Gospel. Jesus is so different from the kind of Messiah the people anticipated that He is not easily accepted. Jesus faces opposition from Jewish political figures, religious leaders, His hometown and family members, and He is eventually forsaken by His own disciples. Even John the Baptist at one point reveals a degree of uncertainty about Jesus. In a real sense, the Gospel of Matthew functions as an apologetic for Jesus' messiahship in view of the doubts and incredulity of the Jewish people. Each time Jesus comes under attack from His

critics, Matthew records a response from Jesus that refutes the charge. The third section of the Gospel climaxes with Jesus' transfiguration, an event that dramatically demonstrates the folly of any who would think Him a charlatan. Likewise, the Gospel's final section, which focuses upon Jesus' arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem, culminates with His resurrection. Jesus appears alive and victorious in Galilee where His ministry began – the final vindication of a Messiah who had not seemed very messianic.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE CHRIST?”

Disbelief in Jesus was still the norm among Jews when Matthew wrote his Gospel and Gentile acceptance was increasing phenomenally. It is reasonable to think that Matthew wrote for a community of Jewish believers whose faith was constantly challenged by their nation's repudiation of Jesus and the Christian faith. I see the validation of Jesus' messiahship in the midst of such circumstances as the driving force of Matthew's Gospel.

To appreciate Matthew's argument for Jesus' messiahship, we need to understand something about the messianic conceptions of Jews in the first-century world. Jews were not monolithic in their religious thought, and this diversity extended to messianism and eschatology. Still, there are some general observations that we can make about typical messianic thinking in the first century and these observations can enlighten us as to (1) the nature of the Jewish opposition to Jesus, and (2) the reasons why Matthew includes in his Gospel the information that he does.

The Davidic Messiah

There were many passages of Scripture that Jews understood to prophesy of an eschatological king who would restore the throne of David and rule over a world-wide kingdom (e.g., Num. 24:17ff; Ps. 2; Ps. 110; Isa. 11:1ff; Zech. 9:9, et al.). But Jews typically interpreted these passages to be speaking of a warrior-king, like David of old, who would defeat in battle the

enemies of God's people (i.e., the Gentiles) and liberate Israel. A first-century B.C. pseudonymous work known as *The Psalms of Solomon* is representative.

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,
the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel
in the time known to you, O God.
Ungird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers,
to purge Jerusalem from Gentiles
who trample her to destruction. (17:21-22)

Many Jewish writings show a similar expectation. The idea of a Davidic warrior-king "constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era" (Collins, *Scepter* 68).

Jesus disclaimed the idea that the Davidic Messiah was to be a carnal warrior. He taught His disciples to submit to Roman authority out of moral obligation, rather than rebelling against Rome (5:41). Like Israel's ancient prophets, Jesus understood sin to be the nation's greatest enemy. Matthew presents Jesus' trek to the cross in this light. Though inexplicable to Jews at the time, Jesus' crucifixion was His ultimate battle against sin and His resurrection the proof of victory (1:21; 20:28; 26:28). Because the Jewish concept of the Davidic Messiah differed so greatly from Jesus' concept, Matthew tells us that Jesus did not publicly claim to be the Davidic Messiah until the very end of His ministry. It is easy to see why the Jewish populace was more ready to consider that He was some kind of prophet than that He was the Davidic Messiah (16:13f).

Jews of the first century did not tend to think that the royal Messiah would possess a supra-human nature. The *Psalms of Solomon* text, quoted above, envisions the Davidic Messiah as a glorious figure, but still just a human being who would reign on earth. The same is true of other contemporary documents (e.g., the *Testament of Judah*, the *Damascus Document*, the *War Rule*, 4QpIs^a, 4Q174, 4Q252, et al.). The apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7, which depicts "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds and being enthroned in heaven, was understood by some first-century Jews to speak of an angelic being (*Similitudes* 46-52) and this transcendent figure is

identified with the Davidic Messiah in *4 Ezra* and in the later Rabbinic Literature (Collins, *Apocalyptic* 183-212). In none of these documents, however, is the Davidic Messiah described as divinity incarnate or possessing a divine nature. In the first century, an expectation of a human, earthly king was clearly the norm. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Akiba (ca. A.D. 135) was criticized for interpreting Daniel 7 to be talking about the Davidic Messiah's heavenly enthronement beside God. The idea was said to "treat in a profane way the Presence of God" (*Hagigah* 14a).

The above facts highlight the striking nature of what we see in Matthew's Gospel. One of its recurring themes is the supra-human, even divine nature of Jesus. He is miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin and called the Son of God (1:18; 4:3; 8:29). He is vastly superior to John the Baptist (3:11). His abundant miracles, His ability to command the wind and sea (8:26), His authority over demons and angels (9:33; 13:41), His right to forgive sins (9:6), His glorious transfiguration (17:2), all of these things indicate that Jesus is a divine being. He is Immanuel – "God with us" – in a sense that the Jews never imagined (1:23).

In Matthew's account of Jesus' final confrontation with the Pharisees in the Temple, Jesus nudges the Pharisees toward considering the idea that Psalm 110:1 spoke of a supra-human messianic king. If the Messiah is only to be a human descendant of David, Jesus asks them, why would David address him as "my Lord"? None of the assembled Pharisees could explain the conundrum (22:41-46). But as readers of Matthew's Gospel, we understand the true nature of Jesus; the reason why David shows subservience to the Messiah is clear. As a divine king, Jesus reigns not in Jerusalem but in heaven at the right hand of God. This is the meaning of the enthronement proclamation of Psalm 110:1, "Sit at My right hand," as well as the vision in Daniel 7. At His trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Jesus applied both passages to himself: "You shall see

the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (26:64). He was charged with blasphemy.

Other Messianic Figures

A messianic king was not the only kind of eschatological figure expected to come in the last days. The Qumran literature, for example, speaks of a future prophet, high priest, and king: “There shall come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel” (1QS 9:10). We also read of an anticipated teacher, “the Interpreter of the Law,” who would offer sure instruction in the Law of Moses (4Q174; *Damascus Document* 6:7-11). Jews also interpreted Malachi’s oracle about the coming of Elijah (Mal. 4:5) to be predicting a literal return of that ancient prophet of Israel (*Sirach* 48:10). Though all Jews did not share an identical expectation regarding these eschatological agents of God, it is clear that Jewish messianism typically involved a plurality of figures.

A point of equal importance, and one not always recognized before the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls, is the fact that first-century Jews did not necessarily expect the messianic king to be the focal point of the eschaton. While the coming of the Davidic Messiah signified the advent of the kingdom, most Jews presumed that each of the various eschatological figures would have their own special role in God’s final plan. The sectarians at Qumran even thought that the messianic high priest would hold a higher status than the messianic king, at least in religious affairs (1QSa 2:20-21; 11QTemple 58:19). In short, first-century Jews did not think of the Davidic Messiah as the eschaton’s all-encompassing figure and the apex of God’s promises.

Matthew’s presentation of the messiahship of Jesus directly challenged these common conceptions. Matthew claims that Jesus is more than just the Davidic Messiah; he presents Jesus as the singular figure of the eschaton who brings all of God’s promises to fruition. John the Baptist did play an important pre-kingdom role by fulfilling the Elijah-prophecy of Malachi 4:5 (in a

figurative and not a literal sense, 11:14), but John was not Jesus' equal in nature or function. John was merely a precursor to the preeminent figure of the kingdom age, Jesus Christ. From the beginning of his Gospel to the end, Matthew presents Jesus as the messianic king in whom all of the eschatological promises of Scripture find realization.

The Prophet

Many Jews expected the coming of a great prophet in the last days who would be comparable to Moses. Deuteronomy 18:15 said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen; you shall listen to him." Jews commonly interpreted this passage eschatologically and envisioned the advent of a Prophet par excellence who would give divine revelation to Israel (1 QS 9:10; John 1:21; 6:14).

The Jewish populace did not readily see Jesus as a royal Messiah, but they (with the exception of the religious leaders) had little difficulty in seeing that He was some kind of prophet (16:14; 21:46). His condemnation of the current religious establishment was reminiscent of the ancient prophets of Israel who rebuked the leaders of their day. Jesus' miracles called to mind the miracles of Moses, Elijah and Elisha (though Jesus' miracles were far more numerous). Matthew's Gospel never explicitly cites the Deuteronomy 18 passage, but the idea that Jesus is the great Prophet like Moses runs throughout the book. Matthew gives us a striking portrait of the Messiah: He is both king and prophet. The melding of these two eschatological functions in one person was an unprecedented way of viewing the prophecies of Scripture.

Matthew points to the prophetic office of Jesus as the ultimate explanation for why He was rejected by His own people. The Jewish nation did not have a history of opposing and executing its kings – but it did have a history of opposing and executing its prophets. Why should it be thought strange, the apostle argues, that our nation would reject its messianic king if, in addition to being

king, he was also a prophet? Jesus' execution at the behest of the Jewish leaders was not contrary to Scripture, but in perfect accord with Scripture's paradigm regarding a prophet's fate. The parable Jesus told about a landowner's vineyard highlighted this point: the renters of a vineyard persecute a succession of servants whom the owner sends to collect his proceeds; finally they even kill the owner's son (21:33-41). The parable's application to Jesus and His treatment by the Jewish religious establishment is clear. Jesus addressed this issue even more pointedly when He told the Jewish leaders in the Temple that the words of Isaiah 28:16 applied to Him. "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone'?" (21:42).

THE FULFILLMENT CITATIONS

On ten occasions in his narrative Matthew tells us that an event in Jesus' life fulfilled what was prophesied in Scripture (1:22; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). The manner of introducing these citations follows a regular formula: "in order that what was spoken ... might be fulfilled." Matthew also records several speeches (usually by Jesus) where something is said to occur in fulfillment of Scripture (e.g., 2:5; 11:10; 13:14; 15:7; 21:42; 26:31). As I noted earlier, the subject matter of Matthew's fulfillment citations corresponds to the overall flow of the Gospel. The apostle did not choose these passages haphazardly; he has a definite plan in view. The textual form of the quotations sometimes corresponds to the Septuagint version, but the formula citations appear largely to be Matthew's own translations from the Hebrew (Gundry 89). Curiously, most of the texts do not appear to have been regarded by Jews as standard messianic prophecies. Most of the texts are not quoted in the other Gospels. I believe that the key to understanding Matthew's fulfillment citations is to recognize that they address facts about Jesus' life that were contrary to ordinary Jewish messianic expectations. A survey of the fulfillment

citations will make this clear and allow us to understand better the polemic that underlies Matthew's Gospel.

In the *Preliminary Events* section (1:1-4:11), Matthew discusses events of Jesus' childhood that unbelieving Jews could have adduced as proof of the falsity of Jesus' messianic claims: His conception by an unmarried woman, His early days spent in Egypt outside the Promised Land, His growing up in unrenowned Nazareth rather than Bethlehem or Jerusalem. Matthew argues that all of these seemingly problematic events were adumbrated in Scripture (citing Isa. 7:14; Mic. 5:1 and 2 Sam. 5:2; Hos. 11:1 and Num. 24:7f; Jer. 31:15; Isa. 4:3 and Judg. 16:17, respectively). He also affirms that the prophecy of a messianic harbinger (Mal. 4:5; Isa. 40:3) was fulfilled by John the Baptist rather than by a literal return of Elijah.

In the *Galilean Ministry* section (4:12 - 11:1), Matthew locates Jesus' prophetic ministry in the region of Galilee and discusses the two salient features of His work: teaching and miracles. To most Jews Galilee seemed a strange locus for prophetic activity since the ancient prophets ministered primarily to the capital cities of Israel and Judah and not in the region of Galilee (cf. John 7:52). Would a true prophet come from Galilee? Matthew responds to this issue by noting that Isaiah 9:1-2 declared that one day God would give spiritual enlightenment to the seemingly forsaken people of Galilee. Scripture also foretold Jesus' healing miracles. Isaiah 53:4 described a prophetic figure who would take away "our infirmities" and "our diseases."

In the *Opposition To Jesus* section (11:2 - 20:34), Matthew tells how Jesus began to be viewed with disfavor by the Jews. He cites Isaiah 42:1-4 to show that Jesus' gentle, non-violent manner of dealing with opposition from His countrymen was foretold, as was the fact that Gentiles would believe in Him. The Jews' stubborn attachment to mistaken preconceptions prevented them from being able to grasp any of Jesus' explicit teaching about the kingdom and forced Him to

speak to the multitudes only in vague parables. Their recalcitrance fit the historical pattern of the people of Israel, as described in Isaiah 6:9-10, Psalm 78:2, and Isaiah 29:13.

In the final section of the Gospel, *Jerusalem: The Ultimate Opposition* (21:1 - 28:20), Matthew uses Scripture to make several points about the fate that befell Jesus in Jerusalem. First, the apostle responds to the false notion that a warrior Messiah would enter Jerusalem and use military means to purge it of Gentile occupation. Matthew shows that Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, riding on the foal of a donkey rather than on a military steed, was precisely the kind of humble, peaceful entrance into Jerusalem that Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9 foretold. He also shows that the execution of Jesus by the nation's religious leaders was an issue Jesus himself had addressed in the Temple prior to His crucifixion. Jesus reminded the Jewish leaders of Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:23, passages that spoke of a spurned agent of God – a “stone” devalued by the nation's builders but chosen by God as the cornerstone of His community. The fact that Jesus' own disciples abandoned Him at the end was not an argument against His messiahship; Jesus announced in advance that they would do this and explained that it was foretold by the words of Zechariah 13:7, “I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.” Matthew argues that even Jesus' betrayal by one of His closest disciples was presaged by Zechariah 11:12f and its precursor texts, Jeremiah 32:6-15 and 18:2f.

In several of the above fulfillment citations Matthew's method of interpretation appears strange to modern readers of the Old Testament. Space will not allow a detailed discussion of this issue here, but it should be noted that Matthew's hermeneutical procedures were very much in keeping with those used by Jews of that day (Neusner, *Midrash* 37-40). What *was* unprecedented, however, was the specific application of all of these texts to the Davidic Messiah. Matthew is arguing to the Jewish mind that the messianic claims of Jesus can be supported from Scripture if

one is willing to look at Scripture in a new way. This new way meant understanding the Scriptures to be pointing toward one key eschatological figure – Jesus the prophet-king.

JESUS AND THE LAW OF MOSES

Jesus' attitude toward the Mosaic Law was a crucial issue in view of Christianity's bold claims about Him. According to prophecy, the messianic king was to be a perfectly righteous monarch who would lead the people in faithful observance of the Law (Isa. 11:1-5). A true prophet also had to be faithful to the Law, and any so-called prophet who led people away from it was to be executed (Deut. 13:1-5). In the minds of unbelieving Jews, Christianity's claims about Jesus' messiahship foundered on this very point. Jesus could not be the Davidic Messiah or the Prophet par excellence, because Jesus often failed to keep the Law of Moses – or so it seemed.

The chief accusers of Jesus were the Pharisees, and Matthew gives prominent space in his Gospel to Jesus' debates with these highly religious Jews. Most scribes (copyists and teachers of the Law) belonged to the Pharisaic sect and this helped give the Pharisees great influence over the Jewish populace. Most Jews admired the Pharisees for their piety and their stress upon the necessity of law-keeping. It is easy for us to oversimplify the members of this sect as people guilty of hypocrisy and ostentatious religiosity. Jesus certainly condemned them for these traits (6:1-5; 23:2-33). But they condemned Jesus for violating the Law of Moses. The reality is that at the root of Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees was a fundamental disagreement over the nature of the Law.

To understand this disagreement we need to understand some things about the purpose of the Law itself. At one level, the Law of Moses was a socio-religious legal code designed by God to organize the Israelite community in Palestine under a strictly theocratic system. In any society civil laws are required to provide social order; Israel's civil laws were of a religious nature. With the

Temple cult as its basis, the Mosaic system produced a unique society predicated on purity regulations that gave the community a ceremonial form of holiness. Anything the Law classified as “unclean” was to be shunned since uncleanness was transferred by contact and a person who became defiled was no longer fit to approach God’s sanctuary or interact with the community.

At another level, the Law of Moses had a deeper function, one that both the Pharisees and Jesus understood. The word *Torah* did not just mean “law”; it also meant “instruction.” In addition to regulating Jewish society, the Mosaic statutes were also intended to point Israel toward principles of personal righteousness that would bring them closer to God. Laws forbidding contact with unclean things and civil regulations establishing social order all suggested a concept of holiness that went beyond these socio-religious statutes themselves. The Mosaic statutes were predicated upon principles that sprang from the mind and nature of God. Therefore, the Law of Moses was a source of instruction on how one could be like God. On this point the Pharisees and Jesus were in agreement. But the principles of personal righteousness that the Pharisees derived from their study of the Law were often not the principles that Jesus saw there.

The Pharisees tended to see the fundamental principles of the Law in terms of cultic (ceremonial) holiness. For example, many of their oral traditions dealt with maintaining holiness through daily washings of their bodies and eating utensils. These “traditions of the elders” were not spelled out in the Law, but they were practices that Pharisaic tradition extrapolated from an analysis of the statutes of Scripture. They understood Scripture to be pointing Israel toward a kind of cultic purity that was not only for priests at the Temple, but for all Jews (Neusner, *Politics* 83-90). After all, didn’t God want all the people of Israel to be holy – a true “kingdom of priests”? The Pharisees did not regard their oral traditions as man-made additions to the Law, but as

necessary outgrowths of the precepts of the Law. If we understand this point, then we will begin to understand the fundamental conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus.

Jesus did not follow the oral traditions of the Pharisees, and as a result they classified Him as a law-breaker. He and His disciples did not purify their hands before they ate (15:2). They associated with unclean people, viz., publicans and sinners (9:11). Jesus frequently performed healings on the Sabbath day – thereby violating the principle of the Sabbath rest (12:10). But Jesus denied guilt on all these charges. He claimed instead that the Pharisees had misinterpreted the fundamental principles upon which the statutes of the Law were based. As a result, the kind of piety they promoted was of an inadequate nature.

Matthew introduces us to this controversy in the first major discourse of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5 - 7). Jesus vehemently denies the assumption that, because He disagreed with the Pharisees, He must be anti-Law (5:17ff). He affirms that the Law must be followed to the letter, but says that the scribes and Pharisees are poor teachers of the kind of righteousness the Law advocated. “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). He then cites six examples of Pharisaic teachings on the Law that were deficient (5:21-48). The forceful pattern of Jesus’ diction, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you,” is unmistakably authoritative.

Some readers have understood Jesus to be contrasting here the Mosaic Law with His own teaching (e.g., Bultmann 75f, 89f; Powell 69). In other words, they see Jesus as taking away the Mosaic code and replacing it with a new religious system (similar to the point made in Hebrews 7:12-19). But this hardly fits the context of Jesus’ discourse (cf. 5:17-20). Nor does it do justice to the fact that, according to the book of Acts, Jewish Christians continued to keep the Mosaic

statutes after the kingdom began and did so with divine approval as long as these statutes were not enforced upon Gentile converts (Acts 21:20-25).

We come closer to the mark if we realize that Jesus is contrasting what the Pharisees taught about the Law with what He teaches about the Law (Earnhart 32). But even here we must not think that all Jesus is doing is correcting Pharisaic exegesis to establish correct Mosaic praxis. Several of the things Jesus says in this sermon clearly go beyond what the Law enforced for Israelite society (Kermode 388-394). For example, the Law did not actually state that a man should be brought before magistrates and punished for angrily calling his neighbor a bad name, or for harboring adulterous thoughts in his heart, or for refusing to lend to someone in need. Yet Jesus condemns all these behaviors as, in some sense, contrary to the Law (5:22,28,42). What He is saying is that the express regulations of the Mosaic Law pointed to underlying moral principles that were incumbent upon a person if he would truly be like God (5:48).

Throughout Matthew's Gospel we see Jesus teaching this approach to the Law. In 15:1-16 He condemns the Pharisees for disobeying the commandment to honor their father and mother by devoting money to the future service of the Temple instead of giving it to their aged and needy parents. This was a traditional Pharisaic practice and by following it they felt that they showed great piety, but in reality they had allowed a voluntary Temple-offering to take precedence over an obligation to care for one's own. Of course no Palestinian court would convict someone for such a misdeed; it was not an overt violation of an express Mosaic ordinance. But Pharisaic devotion to religious ritual had superseded love and compassion. This, Jesus says, was the wrong lesson to derive from Scripture.

Similarly, in 15:11-20 Jesus responds to the Pharisees' charge that His disciples defiled themselves by not following the tradition of washing their hands of impurity before eating a meal. Jesus used the occasion to teach the multitudes what real defilement was all about.

Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth . . . The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man.

Jesus is doing more here than denouncing a Pharisaic ritual that the Law had not mandated. The Law *had* stated that unclean meat was defiling (Lev. 11). Jesus is teaching that defilement in the highest sense does not come from physical contact with any unclean thing, but from illicit thoughts and lusts that one fosters in one's heart. The Pharisees had mistakenly understood the foundational principles of the Mosaic system to pertain to the maintenance of cultic holiness. Jesus says that since the Law was a reflection of the holiness of God, its foundational principles must pertain to moral holiness, for this was the kind of holiness that God possessed.

Jesus' teaching on divorce in 19:3-12 further illustrates the point. He acknowledges that the Mosaic statute in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 permitted divorce in Israelite society; a Jewish man could give his wife a bill of divorcement without being punished for committing a crime. But Jesus says that God intended from the beginning for a husband and wife to be married for life. Debates between Jewish rabbis over how Deuteronomy 24 could be properly carried out missed a more fundamental issue: sending away one's spouse showed an unrighteous disregard for her and for what God intended marriage to be (cf. 5:32-33). If a husband sought to live in accordance with the Law's instruction on personal righteousness, he would not merely abide by the societal statutes of Mosaic Judaism, but by the deeper principles to which the Law pointed.

Clearly, the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees centered upon what those deeper principles of the Law really were. The Pharisees saw them as principles calling for fastidious devotion to ceremonial purity and acts of piety, but Jesus said that attitudinal qualities were what the Law highlighted: "You tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (23:23). The Pharisees misunderstood the Law because they failed to look at it in the way the prophets of old did. Jesus made this point when the Pharisees criticized Him for dining with tax-collectors and sinners. The Pharisees saw these people as irreligious Jews who obviously did not observe ritual purity laws, thereby making their homes and bodies profuse sources of uncleanness (Keener 296). Jesus said that the Pharisees failed to appreciate the insight of the prophet Hosea on such matters. "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:12-13).

The passage Jesus quotes is Hosea 6:6 and it is an important text that helps us understand Jesus' approach to the Law. He cites it on another occasion when the Pharisees charge His disciples with violating the Sabbath by plucking grain as they walked through a field and rubbing it in their hands to separate the edible wheat from the chaff. Jesus considered such stickling about trivialities extreme and discordant with the purpose of the Law and the character of God. He responded, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (12:7-8). The Pharisees failed to see that compassion and mercy were principles of righteousness that undergirded all of the Mosaic statutes. Those statutes could never be applied in ways that would cause one to behave uncompassionately.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus said the two greatest commandments of the Law were to love God and to love one's neighbor: "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the

Prophets” (22:40). Failing to love their neighbor is what caused the Pharisees to falsely accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath commandment when He healed a man with a withered hand on that day (12:9-13). Jesus replied that the command to rest on the seventh day of the week did not mean that one should rest from helping the afflicted. To think otherwise was to ignore the goodness of God. “It is lawful,” Jesus said, “to do good on the Sabbath” (12:12). With all their attention to law-keeping, the Pharisees failed to draw the right lessons from the Law. Their greatest error, however, was their refusal to accept Jesus as the one who could enlighten them.

MATTHEW’S GOSPEL FOR EVERY AGE

I have argued earlier that, despite the opinions of modern scholarship, the Gospel of Matthew was most likely written prior to A.D. 70 and the fall of Jerusalem. Yet Matthew designed His Gospel for a Jewish-Christian community who shortly would have to face that calamity. In August of A.D. 70 the armies of Titus would destroy the Temple, and the unique society that the Mosaic Law created would come to an end. The people would be able to continue their Jewish lifestyle to some extent, even as their ancestors in Babylonian exile had continued to live as Jews without a Temple. But the sanctuary rituals were the center of Mosaic Judaism and this sanctuary would never be rebuilt. After A.D. 70 a Jew’s lifestyle could possess at best only the trappings of the Judaic heritage.

The collapse of Mosaic Judaism would shock and profoundly affect the diverse Jewish groups of Palestine. The Sadducees, Herodians and Essenes died out fairly quickly. The Pharisees, with their heavy emphasis upon individual purity and oral tradition, were able to handle the absence of the Temple cult better than other Judaic groups, but only by mutating the religion into a rabbi-centered system that relied completely upon Torah study and oral tradition, viz., Rabbinic Judaism (Neusner, *Politics* 149-154).

Unlike other Jews, Jewish Christians were not shocked by the events of A.D. 70. Matthew's Gospel helped prepare them for this time of transition. Jesus had forewarned His apostles about Jerusalem's destruction (24:1ff); it would be God's judgment upon the nation for rejecting their Messiah (23:37-39). More importantly, Jesus' teaching on the Law provided believers with an understanding of true principles of righteousness that did not require a Mosaic social order for their implementation. Moreover, Matthew's Gospel encouraged Jewish Christians to look toward the Gentiles as potential recipients of the salvation that their own countrymen had spurned. The moral principles that the Law adumbrated could be practiced in any society the world over. Matthew's emphasis upon spreading the gospel to the Gentiles – "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (28:19) – encouraged a new outlook for the future. Jesus was the Messiah of Jew and Gentile alike and Jewish Christians needed to take the message of Christ to the world.

This brings us to a point where we can appreciate the value of the Gospel of Matthew for our own generation. Jesus the messianic king, prophet, and teacher is the singular hope for the world. Despite what current liberal scholarship says of Matthew's Gospel, its testimony about Jesus will persuade honest hearts today just as it did in the first century. The principles of righteousness that Jesus taught are principles that citizens of God's kingdom can and must apply today in whatever kind of society they may live. It makes no difference how sophisticated our world may become technologically or how different our culture is from the Jewish community of Matthew's era. Jesus is the answer for sinful human beings in any and every millennium, for all time. "I am with you always," He said, "even to the end of the age" (28:20).

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