



Texts in Context

Identity Formation: Matthew as Resource and Guide

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PREACHING IN THE YEAR OF MATTHEW IS A CHALLENGE BECAUSE THE GOSPEL OF Matthew is so rich. One can introduce people to the entire fullness of the Christian faith on the basis of Matthew. But that very richness raises issues as one considers lectionary year A. We need to be clear about several matters as we move toward preaching this gospel.

1. Matthew is written somewhere about the year 90 C.E., that is, he belongs to the second generation of Christianity, a time when his church is facing a crisis of identity.¹ The destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, made the Jewish community rethink its own identity. With the temple destroyed, the Torah, written and interpreted, became the center of Jewish identity. The variety that characterized Judaism before 70 C.E. disappeared, and “groups” now considered aberrant were excluded. That included the Jewish Christians who were the majority in Matthew’s church. Their exclusion raised the question whether they had lost their past and so their identity. Matthew wrote to strengthen them in the face of that exclusion.

2. Matthew employs sources, two especially: Mark and Q—the material he has in common with Luke. He also has a large block of unique material. Redaction criticism, literary criticism, and the study of the social arena are indispensable tools for the interpretation of Matthew, and a synopsis of the gospels should be used constantly. The interpreter needs to examine how Matthew edits his sources, including any changes or additions he makes and the literary shape he gives to his

¹J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

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gospel. To preach responsibly in the year of Matthew one needs to isolate and stress Matthew's peculiar contributions to the interpretation of Jesus.

3. The lectionary is not inspired and is therefore open to revision in order to include key Matthean texts that are omitted. This should not be done often or lightly, but should be done in some specific cases. For example, the lectionary omits completely Matt 1:1-17, though that passage is essential to understanding who Jesus is. Matt 1:18-25 is selected as the gospel for Advent 4, though it is the Christmas story according to Matthew. I would preach on Matt 1:1-18 on Advent 4 and use 1:18-25 on Christmas Eve.

I. MATTHEW AND THE CHRIST

Matthew stresses who Jesus is in terms of his hearers' Jewish heritage. The Matthean prologue runs from 12:1 to 4:16. The first verse, supported by the genealogy (1:2-17), stresses that Jesus is a true Israelite (son of Abraham) and the expected King Messiah (son of David). The genealogy is organized around the number fourteen, probably a numerical play on the name David (דָּוִד): the dalet is the Hebrew number four, the vav the number six, and so the numerical equivalent of David is 14. Matthew gives an edited sequence of the southern king list (the descendants of David) in the genealogy.² Note how kingly the subsequent story is: Jesus' birth fulfills a promise made to a Davidic king (Isa 7:14, cited in Matt 1:23). He is born in Bethlehem (David's town) in fulfillment of Mic 3:1-3 (2:1-12) and recognized as a king by foreign magi. In Matt 3:1-2 John the Baptist announces the impending arrival of the royal rule of God (word for word the same message Jesus proclaims in 4:17) and points to Jesus as the mightier one to come.³

Jesus is also an authentic son of Abraham, a true Israelite. Like Israel he comes out of Egypt as God's son (Matt 2:13-15, citing Hos 11:1). He responds to John's call for baptism, in order "to fulfill all piety" (Matt 3:14-15).⁴ In the desert he lives before God as Moses called Israel to live (4:1-11); Jesus cites Deut 8:3, 6:16, and 6:11, all warnings to Israel not to repeat the sins of their parents in the wilderness of the exodus. Jesus stresses the Torah's abiding relevance (5:17-20), pays the temple tax (17:24-27), and observes the passover. He cites the Old Testament frequently. In short, Jesus is a good Jew.

He is anchored in the history of his people; the genealogy makes that clear. But it is a genealogy that includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife, and Mary. Rahab and Ruth are not Israelites, yet are taken into the ancestors of David. Tamar took the initiative to claim her rights, Rahab was a prostitute, and Ruth crawled into Boaz's bed. Thus the genealogy foreshadows Jesus' inclusion of the Centurion of Capernaum (Matt 8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:20-28) within the Israel to which he was sent, his concern for the poor (Matt 11:2-6), and his eating

²Luke's genealogy differs radically from Matthew's after King David—and it begins with Adam, not Abraham.

³Jesus' actions surprise John, as Matt 11:2-6 makes clear. The story functions as one Matthean mode of redefining messianic kingship.

⁴δικαιοσύνη is a key term in Matthew. Cf. 5:5, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32.

with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 11:19; cf. 9:9-12). Matt 1:1-4:16 identifies Jesus as a true Israelite and the messianic king, both anchored in the Old Testament.

II. MATTHEW'S CAREFUL WRITING

Matthew gives us five discourses;
In threes and sevens he likes his sources
He writes to show what OT meant,
With an ecclesiastic bent.

1. *Matthew as Literary Artist*

That bit of doggerel (whose author I have never been able to discover) is right on target. Matthew is a literary artist who arranges his material carefully, using formulae that he repeats. Therefore we should pay close attention to his literary markers. These aid us in understanding Matthew's intentions. For example, Matt 4:17 and 16:21 are formally parallel, each using the phrase ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς ("From that time on, Jesus began...") plus an infinitive to introduce a major theme of Jesus' teaching: the royal rule of God and the prediction of the death and resurrection of the Son of Humanity.⁵ The first gives the theme of Jesus' public proclamation, the second the teaching given to his disciples.

Matthew uses the technique of inclusion. He interprets Isa 7:14 as a prediction of the virgin birth of Jesus; it gives the child the name Immanuel, "God with us." But the child is not named Immanuel, but Jesus! And Isa 9:6, the fulfillment of Isa 7:14 in the book of Isaiah, is not cited in relation to his birth. Rather Matt 28:20 ("And look, I am with you always to the close of the age") finally applies to Jesus the "God with us" motif. Thus the birth of Jesus is the prelude to Jesus as God's presence. It is the resurrected Jesus who is ultimately the fulfillment of Isa 7:14! Now there's an Easter proclamation—even though the lectionary puts it on Pentecost 2 (Trinity) because of the baptismal formula.

2. *"Matthew gives us five discourses"*

The five discourses are in large measure unique to Matthew's Gospel. Each ends with a variation of the same formula: καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτι ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ("Now when Jesus had finished saying these things..."—7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). It is striking that each is addressed only to disciples! Thus the five discourses are teaching specifically for disciples; they are a precis of true disciple life and activity. They are arranged in logical order: the sermon on the mount (5:1-7:27), the missionary discourse (10:1-42), the parables (13:1-53), community discipline (18:1-35), and the apocalyptic discourse (24:1-25:46).

3. *"In threes and sevens he likes his sources"*

Sources? Mark, Q, and his special material? More likely this refers to the way in which Matthew arranges his material. Matthew 8-9 contains 3 sets of 3 miracles, divided by discipleship narratives. These chapters lead up to Matthew 10, the great missionary discourse.⁶ Matthew's Jesus narrates three parables after the dis-

⁵I use this for the more familiar "Son of Man."

⁶The lectionary omits most of Matthew 8-9; thus the background for the missionary discourse is lacking.

pute about authority in Matthew 21, while chapter 13 contains seven parables and chapter 23 seven woes.

4. "He wrote to show what OT meant"

Matthew often cites the Old Testament formally, that is with an almost stereotypical introduction calling attention to the fulfillment.⁷ The citations are used as warrants, that is, as proofs. Matthew's readers must have known the Old Testament quite well. He is concerned to show that Jesus is the true fulfillment of the Old Testament and that his community correctly understands the Old Testament. Hiding behind his interpretation of the Old Testament may well be the accusation that the Old Testament belongs to the post-70 Jewish community and that Matthew's community "twists the scriptures."⁸ That means that reading Matthew benefits greatly from an intertextual interpretation, to use a modern term. One should look for formal citations, implicit citations, and allusions to the Old Testament throughout the gospel. Note which books he cites. He makes use of the Psalms and the prophets, especially Isaiah. Jesus in Matthew stresses the validity of the Torah. The language of the Old Testament lies behind or is overt in much of what he says.⁹

But Matthew uses the Old Testament in amazing ways. Compare the citations in Matthew 2. Matthew inserts the term "by no means" (οὐδαμῶς) into the citation of Mic 5:1 (2:6), interprets Hos 11:1 as a prediction (2:15), when it refers to a past event in Hosea, and cites an unidentifiable passage in 2:23. In 21:5 he omits a line from Zech 9:9, "just and bringing salvation" (δίκαιος καὶ σωζῶν) and in 27:9 states that Jeremiah is fulfilled when he actually cites Zech 11:13.¹⁰ Matthew applies the Old Testament directly to his own time. He expressed the basis for that in 13:51-52: "Every scribe disciplined to the royal rule of God is like a steward who brings out of the storehouse things old and things new." That is precisely what Matthew does with the Old Testament. In the process he claims it (with the Torah) for his community, which truly understands and interprets the Old Testament.

5. "With an ecclesiastic bent": Matthew and his community

Matthew is the only gospel to use the term ἐκκλησία (16:18; 18:17).¹¹ But he does more than simply reflect that the term "church" has become usual in his time. Matthew strives to show that his community is formed by God in continuity with God's past will and action. Read Isa 51:1-5 along with Matt 16:17-19 and recognize that Peter is the rock on which the new community is founded, the counterpart to

⁷Formal citations are found in 1:23 (Isa 7:14); 2:6 (Mic 5:1); 2:15 (Hos 11:1); 2:18 (Jer 31:15); 2:23 (not in the OT; allusion to Isa 11:1? Judg 13:3?); 3:3 (Isa 40:3 LXX); 4:25-26 (Isa 8:23-9:1 = 9:1-2 LXX); 8:17 (Isa 53:4); 12:18-21 (Isa 42:1-4); 13:35 (Ps 79:2); 21:5 (Isa 62:11; Zech 9:9); 27:9-10 (Zech 11:13; cf. Jer 18:1-2, 32:6-9).

⁸The phrase comes from the title of an article by S. Vernon McCasland, "Matthew Twists the Scriptures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961) 143-148.

⁹Therefore a concordance to the Septuagint should lie on one's desk as one reads Matthew.

¹⁰On this passage see, *inter alia*, J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1954) 182-188.

¹¹E. Krentz, "The Egalitarian Church of Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4 (1977) 333-341.

Abraham's role in Israel.¹² Thus Matthew's community has a legitimate beginning, correlated with that of Israel. The beatitudes in Matt 5:3-10 apply to the disciples language that in the Old Testament had been applied to Israel. The church is to observe the "law and the prophets" (Matt 5:17-20) to such a degree that it has piety (δικαιοσύνη) that goes beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees, as exemplified in Matt 5:21-7:12 (note the inclusion formed by the phrase "law and prophets").

The five great sermons describe the life of the church. The sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7) describes the life of piety in conformity with the Torah. It concentrates on the individual disciple. Matthew 10 describes the need to witness to one's faith.¹³ Matthew 13 interprets the divided response that proclamation receives, assuring the community that it will nonetheless have effects. Disciples are not to weed out the hypocrites. Matthew 18 describes how the community is to carry out the saving will of God in relation to the weak and to the erring community member. Forgiven disciples are to forgive. Matthew 24-25 describe the community as it waits for the parousia.¹⁴ The use of the term parousia prepares for Matt 28:18-20 (the "great commission"), formed on the basis of an enthronement ritual or presented as the decree of a ruler.¹⁵

III. MATTHEW AND DISCIPLESHIP: CHRISTIAN LIFE

Matthew radically changes Mark's messianic secrecy motif. This begins in Matthew 13, where the disciples understand Jesus' parables, while the outsiders get parables in order to conceal the message. When asked if they understand all this, the disciples answer, "Yes." Disciples are to know! (Matt 13:51-52). They recognize who he is. Their reaction to Jesus' walking on the water is worship of him as "Son of God" (Matt 14:33), while in Mark 6:51-52 they do not understand! When he comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration, they understand that he talked about John the Baptist (Matt 17:13) and are distressed by his prediction of the passion (Matt 17:23). Disciples understand and know in Matthew, remain ignorant and obdurate in Mark.¹⁶

The disciples prize the Torah. It is no surprise, therefore, that Matthew stresses δικαιοσύνη, piety, the proper response to God, as Jesus himself had (Matt 3:14-15). This includes the proper practice of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (Matt 6:1-18 puts them under the general order to practice "piety," δικαιοσύνη). But piety is also practical. It is to seek to reconcile (Matt 5:21-26) and to forgive (Matt

¹²See T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949) 201-205.

¹³Note Matt 11:1. Contrary to Mark and Luke, Matthew never records an actual preaching mission of the disciples. Add that Matt 10:17-23 describes witnessing in the situation of the post-Easter, post-70 church and you realize that it applies directly to Matthew's community.

¹⁴Matthew alone of the four gospels uses the term παρουσία (four times: Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39).

¹⁵As royal decree, see Robert Smith, *Easter Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 76-91. As enthronement ritual, see Otto Michel, "The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel," in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 30-41.

¹⁶See E. P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon, 1960) 102-109. Jack Kingsbury had stressed the separation of the disciples from the outsiders in *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13: A Study in Redaction-Criticism* (London: SPCK, 1969).

18:21-35). Pious disciples will not look for status, but regard themselves as the servants of others (Matt 20:21-28; 23:1-12). The disciple will be like a little child (Matt 18:1-5). Such piety is practical. It does the deeds praised by the Son of Humanity (Matt 25:34-40). The conclusion of the sermon on the mount states that even a true confession of faith will not be effectual if such piety is not present: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in the heavens." (That will is a saving will, as Matt 18:14 makes clear.) If one pleads prophecy, exorcisms, and miracles as proof of one's confession, Jesus will respond with a counter confession: "I never recognized you; get away from me you who produce what breaks the Torah" (Matt 7:21-23). Matthew proclaims a practical, active discipleship that strives for justice and equality.

IV. THE JEWISH QUESTION

Matthew raises the problem of anti-Judaism in the New Testament, a sensitive issue with which every preacher must come to terms. C. F. D. Moule calls Matthew "The Gospel against the Jews."¹⁷ Matthew's anti-Judeans attitude¹⁸ arises from the situation of his church. In striving to give legitimacy to his Jewish Christian community, he puts down the Jews of Judea. Jesus enters Jerusalem as its judge, not its deliverer; hence the omission from the Old Testament citation in Matt 21:5. He goes directly to the temple and cleanses it (a different chronology from Mark and Luke). When he curses the fig tree in 12:18-22, it withers immediately, an act of judgment. He accuses them of not listening to John the Baptist when he came on "the path of righteousness" and then says that "the royal rule of God will be taken from them and given to a nation that produces its fruits" (shades of John's words in 3:7-12). While Matt 10:5-6 limits the disciples' mission to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," Matt 28:16-20 commands making disciples of all the nations, by baptizing and teaching them to observe all that Jesus had commanded. Matthew ends by stressing Jesus' teaching inscripturated in his gospel for all people, including the Jewish people.

V. PREACHING IN YEAR A

How does one preach in year A? There are many themes that I have not discussed, for example, the geography of Matthew, his eschatology, his use of christological titles.¹⁹ But what is clear is that anyone preaching from Matthew must stress the identity of Jesus in seeking to shape the identity of the preacher's congregation in Matthean terms. One does not do this by simply repeating Matthew;

¹⁷C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 124. Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 146-168 has useful resource material on Matthew's view of the Jews.

¹⁸I use the term "Judeans" to obviate a false inference that Matthew is against all Jews! He is against those who are against his community, trying to exclude them from their heritage.

¹⁹I have discussed many of them in the article "More Than Many Lessons: On Preaching Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (1992) 440-452, an issue in honor of Prof. Wilhelm Linss.

rather, one must translate Jesus' identity into terms that clarify the basis of his abiding presence in the church today. One gives identity to one's congregation by anchoring it in the Old Testament, by making it aware of the long history that has shaped it, by reminding it of its founders, and by urging it to acts of justice. Such preaching and teaching will combat anti-semitism by stressing the semitic roots of our faith and noting that the nations of Matt 28:18 include also the Jewish people. At the same time one will respect the Abrahamic covenant as a valid word of God to the people formed in the exodus. In short, one will apply Matthew's historical and exegetical methods to proclaim Jesus as the outcome of history and the shaper of history, who both urges the abiding validity of the Torah and removes its burden (Matt 5:17-20 and 11:25-30, in the light of Sirach 51). ⊕