

Meeting Matthew

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Matthew, the longest gospel and the first New Testament book, has in many respects been the most influential in the history of the church, for good and for ill. Its opening provides a hurdle for the new reader. Who wants to read through a list of names?¹ But the hurdle meant a lot for the first hearers, connecting the story of God in Jesus to God in the past and, through playful numerics based on the letters that make up David's name,² underlining that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, the Son of David.³ That will have meant more for its first hearers who had strongly Jewish backgrounds than it might for us or for people from other backgrounds, but they, too, are not left behind. The inclusion of women in the genealogy,⁴ is in itself unusual, and is much more so because they can be seen as non-Israelite in some sense and as morally ambiguous, unlike Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, for instance. There were probably such allegations also about Mary.

So begins a story which veers towards inclusion of those whom others might exclude. Not your usual Sadducee or Pharisee, these are like the stones (Heb. *'bnym*) from which God has made children (*bnym*)⁵ and the Gentile magi who came to do homage to the wonderchild born under a star.⁶ The star, of course, reflected Jewish messianic hope,⁷ but also widened the horizon to a universal perspective. So already in the opening chapters we have a foretaste of what is promised in the great commission with which the gospel ends, that all nations are to be made learners (disciples) of the way of Jesus and what he taught.⁸

That universal dimension also finds an echo in the designation of Jesus not just as Israel's messiah, reflecting continuity with the old, but also as Son of Man and universal judge, whom John the Baptist announces.⁹ For before him, according to Jesus' last public teaching, all nations will be gathered as separated as sheep and goats.¹⁰ As already in the Parables of Enoch,¹¹ written probably around the turn of the millennia, the figure of the royal Messiah and the heavenly Son of Man sitting on the throne of his glory are merged.¹²

Matthew's depiction of Jesus is unmistakably Jewish. His legends of Jesus' infancy have him travel down to Egypt like Israel of old and like baby Moses and Pharaoh and Israel with Balak be threatened with extermination by King Herod.¹³ Only Pilate would succeed in this, the allusion to

¹ 1:1-17.

² David = 14; 3 x 14 generations; also 6 x 7 and Jesus the 7th: perfection.

³ 1:1.

⁴ Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah.

⁵ 3:9.

⁶ 2:1-12.

⁷ Num 24:17.

⁸ 28:18-20.

⁹ 3:11-12.

¹⁰ 25:31-46.

¹¹ 1 Enoch 37 – 71.

¹² 1 Enoch 61:8; 62:2-6; 69:27-29.

¹³ 2:13-18; Exod 1:15-22; Num 22:1-6.

“King of the Jews” in the birth narratives¹⁴ foreshadowing the story’s climax.¹⁵ We also have echoes of Joseph the dreamer. The strongly Jewish colouring continues as Matthew adapts the narrative of Jesus’ temptation like Israel in the wilderness. Like Luke, he found it in their common source called “Q”.¹⁶ The colouring continues further when Matthew picks up Mark’s reference to Jesus’ ascending a mount to appoint 12 disciples¹⁷ and makes it the setting for his first major collection of Jesus’ teaching in chapters 5 – 7, portraying Jesus as like Moses on Sinai.¹⁸

After just 13 verses Mark has Jesus begin his ministry by summarising his message: “The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel”.¹⁹ Matthew reaches this point only after nearly four chapters where he has been supplementing Mark with new sources. He then trims it to: “Repent; for the kingdom of heaven (heaven’s = God’s kingdom) is at hand.”²⁰ He had said more than enough about fulfilment. But his innovation went further. He used this as the summary also of John the Baptist’s message,²¹ one of a number of moves in which he shows Jesus as continuing John’s emphases. Typical is his taking up a saying of John’s and giving it also to Jesus. Thus both now proclaim that trees must bear fruit; otherwise they will be cut down.²²

John’s message and Jesus’ message stand in continuity. We see this later when after narrating the expulsion from the temple Matthew adds two further parables to the one he found in Mark,²³ his source, so that we have a sequence of three, depicting people’s responses to John, Jesus, and the disciples, as all having the same message.²⁴ For Matthew Jesus goes beyond John, as the one whom John predicted, but John gives us a clear indication of who Jesus is, what role he was to play, and why he was to be hailed the saviour.

John announced that Jesus would be the judge to come, indeed with such emphasis, that Matthew shows John a little confused that Jesus was not living up to those expectations.²⁵ Where was his fire? Why wasn’t he judging? In response to John’s disciples sent to Jesus with this quandary, Jesus replies by telling John not to be offended but to note what he had been doing, a kind of summary of his deeds sampled in chapters 8 – 9. Matthew’s innovation was not to contradict John’s prediction, but to show that there were two stages to its fulfilment. First, Jesus came as judge to come to announce the basis of judgement and to focus on compassion in teaching and action as the heart of God’s Law and only then would he come again to execute judgement. Matthew’s good news is in that sense that the judge has come telling us the basis of judgement and so giving us all a chance.

¹⁴ 2:2.

¹⁵ 27:11, 27-31, 37.

¹⁶ 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.

¹⁷ 3:13.

¹⁸ 5:1.

¹⁹ 1:15.

²⁰ 4:17.

²¹ 3:2.

²² 3:10; 7:19. Luke 3:9.

²³ 12:1-12.

²⁴ 21:28-32; 21:33-45; 22:1-14.

²⁵ 11:2-6.

Thus not only do we have John's depiction of Jesus' role as judge. We also have that role explicated in the so-called Sermon on the Mount,²⁶ and constantly repeated through the gospel,²⁷ right up to the final scene which depicts the judgement day in the parable of the sheep and the goats.²⁸ What matters most is a relationship with God that issues in action. Actions, not acclamations, even acclaiming Jesus as Lord, are what will matter at the judgement.²⁹ Jesus is supremely, in Matthew, therefore, the interpreter of the Law. While Matthew portrays Jesus as targeting his fellow Jews, he does so in a way that Jesus also targets believers of Matthew's time, applying the same criteria of faith lived out inaction. This is not about doing good things to earn your salvation. It is about being connected with God in a way that changes who you are and what you do. The challenge to be perfect³⁰ is for Matthew not an impossible dream but a demand that we let God be God and open ourselves up wholly to God, the God of compassion who calls us to embrace good news for the poor. There is no other way to share God's life.³¹

That is more than threat. It is that consistently, a recurring theme in all five major discourses,³² perhaps deliberately echoing the fivefold form the Law of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy. It is also, however, a promise of life. Thus on his Sinai mount Jesus declares promised blessings³³ to the dispirited poor (not spiritualised), those who hunger for justice (for themselves and others), those who mourn for change like Israel of old,³⁴ the lowly, the persecuted, but also the merciful and peacemakers. To people in need and to people who respond to them the promise is justice and peace. This is both promise and encouragement or challenge. To be loving is to be light, salt, and a city of God.³⁵

Matthew then has Jesus spell out his stance. He has no ambition to sideline scripture or set the Law aside.³⁶ On the contrary Matthew's Jesus will not tolerate even a single stroke of the Law being set aside.³⁷ He shared this stance with Luke and both drew on the same source, Q.³⁸ It would certainly reassure those Jews who had heard of some believers in Jesus setting the Law or parts of it aside. Consistent with this, Matthew regularly modifies his source Mark in taking up his material where Mark advocates such a view.³⁹ The first Christians were divided over the extent to which one could set such biblical commands as circumcision and food or purity laws aside,⁴⁰ with some, like Paul, advocating flexibility,⁴¹ Mark differentiating the cultic and ethical,⁴² and Luke allowing exceptions only when indicated by divine intervention such as relaxing the requirement of circumcision.⁴³

²⁶ 7:15-23.

²⁷ 13:47-50; 16:27-28.

²⁸ 25:31-46.

²⁹ 7:21-23.

³⁰ 5:48.

³¹ 19:16-22.

³² 5 – 7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25.

³³ 5:3-12.

³⁴ Isa 61:1-3.

³⁵ 5:13-16.

³⁶ 5:17.

³⁷ 5:18.

³⁸ 16:17.

³⁹ Compare Mark 7:1-23 and Matt 15:1-20, where Mark has Jesus set food and purity laws aside.

⁴⁰ Acts 15; Gal 2:11-14.

⁴¹ Rom 6:1; 7:1-6.

Matthew holds the line on full observance of the Law and disapproves of alternatives.⁴⁴ His approach is, however, far from legalistic. It is perhaps best symbolised by his use of another saying found also in Q: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others”.⁴⁵ Notice that nothing is to be neglected, not even tithing herbs! But the emphasis is on “justice and mercy and faith”. This is precisely the emphasis we find when Matthew provides a sample of six expositions of the Law and what greater righteousness in keeping it means in 5:21-48.

Typically the focus is not ceremonial or cultic law, but ethics. Murder, adultery, oaths reflect prohibitions in the ten commandments. The rest reflect further aspects of the Law, implied or otherwise. Like other radical Jewish expositions of the period, Matthew has Jesus push towards a more comprehensive approach. Jesus is not contrasting himself with the Law, which would contradict 5:17-20, but contrasting his interpretation with how others had been hearing and interpreting the Law.

Pursued at depth, prohibiting murder has to lead to outlawing hate and all anger which harbours it. Thus the first and the sixth carry the same theme: no hating; love your enemy. Don't write anyone off! Similarly adultery has to be about more than act; it must be about attitude. The message is not about women being dangerous, as if the text referred to looking at a woman with the result that one finds her sexually attractive, but about men taking responsibility for their sexual attitude and not looking at others' wives with a view to wanting to “have” them. Extreme imagery of cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes underlines the seriousness of the approach. The restriction of divorce except for adultery, which in both Jewish and Greco-Roman law required terminating the marriage, counters callous divorce which had become a problem. Pushing beyond oaths to an integrity which does not need them made sense. Others made the same point. Rejecting retaliation is another corollary of abandoning hateful anger. In various ways these all put compassion at the heart of how one should interpret the Law as a faithful Jew, reflecting Judaism at its best.

Matthew has Jesus address the practices of devotion, fasting, prayer, giving, with a similar focus on integrity rather than the manipulative self interest of hypocrisy.⁴⁶ Centredness, treasuring the good, singleness of vision and loyalty are basic to integrity.⁴⁷ Day to day survival in trust like the birds would have made sense for those for whom it was first propounded, locals assuming local support,⁴⁸ unlike in other contexts where provision and planning was mandated. Matthew has Jesus reassert the centrality of love as he brings this first discourse to an end⁴⁹ and reinforces the requirement that it needs to be love in action, bearing fruit,⁵⁰ not words.⁵¹

⁴² 10:17-22.

⁴³ Acts 10.

⁴⁴ 5:19.

⁴⁵ 23:23; Luke 11:42.

⁴⁶ 6:1-18.

⁴⁷ 6:19-24.

⁴⁸ 6:25-34.

⁴⁹ 7:12.

⁵⁰ 7:15-20.

This pattern repeats itself in all Matthew's discourses and the theme of compassion keeps being illustrated in action. Forgiveness is part of that love,⁵² even though Matthew also knows the eucharistic tradition which links it especially with Jesus' death.⁵³ His claims about Jesus' status would have alienated many fellow Jews, so that some see Matthew as no longer Jewish. Matthew's view would be otherwise, while bearing signs of grief about rejection of his community by the dominant mood of the synagogues. Set probably within a society where Jews administered local law, Matthew's Jesus urges respect, but critically, claiming that his teaching and praxis was the more faithful.⁵⁴ His community, his church, claimed a delegated authority to teach and determine what was right and wrong and discipline accordingly to the point of expulsion,⁵⁵ though within a context of compassion and care.⁵⁶

Matthew directs us firmly to love as the centre for understanding our religious tradition and its laws, but leaves us with some tension through its strategy of seeking to persuade through the threat of judgement, leaving the modern day interpreter with the challenge to discern the light from the shade.

⁵¹ 7:21-27.

⁵² 9:2-8; 6:12; 18:21-35.

⁵³ 26:26-29.

⁵⁴ 23:1-12.

⁵⁵ 16:13-20; 18:15-20.

⁵⁶ 18:10-14, 21-35.