

# Problems and Opportunities in Matthew's Gospel

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Every problem is an opportunity. So says a business dictum that has made America great. I suggest that Christian teachers and preachers can apply this dictum to seven real or imagined problems that we face as we enter another year in the Sunday lectionary cycle when most Gospel texts are from Matthew. I hope to show that what on the surface may seem problematic in Matthew's Gospel can open up opportunities in which religious educators and preachers can address positively and constructively issues that are at the heart of Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

## **A pedestrian Christology?**

On the surface Matthew's Gospel may seem an unlikely source for fresh insights in Christology, at least when compared with John and Paul. As the author of one of the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew presents a "common vision" alongside Mark and Luke. He portrays Jesus as a wise teacher and a powerful healer. He adopts Mark's tripartite narrative structure: the Galilean mission; the journey narrative; and the Jerusalem ministry, and passion, death, and resurrection.

Without reflecting only on the elements common to all three Synoptic Gospels, teachers and preachers may also want to give special attention to how Matthew diverges from Mark's outline. The most

obvious addition is the infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2. By including a genealogy, the evangelist connects Jesus to Abraham, David, and the exile generation, thus firmly rooting Jesus in Jewish history. By clarifying Joseph's role with regard to Jesus, he shows how the virginally conceived Son of God became the legal Son of David. By tracing the movements of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Nazareth by way of Egypt, he foreshadows the conflict and suffering that will culminate in the passion.

The other obvious addition occurs after the empty tomb narrative in Matthew 28. There the risen Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" and then to the eleven remaining apostles (minus Judas). In both cases he entrusts them with a mission, with an eye toward carrying on his own mission. Matthew also continues the apologetic motif of the guard at the tomb begun in chapter 27.

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1. See *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William J. Thompson, S.J.*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001); Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Mark Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

Matthew's most massive additions, however, appear in the five great speeches: the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), the Missionary Discourse (chap. 10), the Parables (chap. 13), the Community Discourse (chap. 18), and the Eschatological Discourse (chaps. 24–25). While Mark refers to Jesus as a new kind of teacher, he provides relatively few extended examples of Jesus' teachings. By use of materials from Mark, the Sayings Source Q, and traditions found only in Matthew (M), Matthew more than makes up for the lack of content that he found in Mark. Moreover, these speeches and other teachings elsewhere provide the basis for what is a very strong emphasis in Matthew Gospel: Jesus as the "one teacher" or the "one instructor" (23:8, 10). There is a rich mine of teaching and preaching material in Matthew's Gospel.

While Matthew shares the major christological titles with other New Testament writers, the Jewish context in which he places Jesus and in which he wrote should encourage Christian preachers and teachers to give special attention to their roots in the Old Testament and early Judaism. For example, in dealing with Jesus as the Messiah/Son of David they might survey not only the pertinent biblical passages but also texts like *Psalms of Solomon 17* and the Qumran scrolls. Likewise, they might track down the texts that describe Israel as the Son of God and portray the Son of Man as human (Ezekiel) and heavenly (Daniel 7). These titles arose early in the Jesus movement. The Jewish context in which Matthew places them invites a special effort at appreciating their distinctive Jewish resonances in this Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

### Moralism?

The Sermon on the Mount is the most famous part of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>3</sup> While often admired and praised for its high ethi-

cal standards, it is sometimes also regarded with suspicion as encouraging moralism and "works" righteousness. In some circles it is described as "the new law" or "the law of Christ," while others consider it as proposing an impossible ethic designed to throw one back upon the grace of God. I prefer to read it as an example of Christian virtue ethics. The keyword here is "Christian."

The Sermon on the Mount must never be detached from the narrative of Jesus as told by Matthew. It is neither a law code nor an ethical treatise. Rather, it is part of the story of Jesus the wise teacher. Its audience consists not only of Jesus' first disciples but also of the crowds who had converged upon him (see 5:1–2 and 7:28–29). It teaches at both the individual and the communal levels. Jesus instructs all those willing to listen and put his teachings into action. In literary form the Sermon is closest to the wisdom instructions that appear in Proverbs 1–9 and 22–24, Qoheleth, Sirach, and other Jewish wisdom books.

2. See Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); Young S. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Celia M. Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus and the Sages: Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew's Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Lidija Novakovic, *Messiah, the Healer of the Sick: A Study of Jesus as the Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew* (Tübingen, 2003).

3. See Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

The Sermon addresses all who aspire to God's kingdom. The introductory section (5:1–20) describes the appropriate values and attitudes of the aspirants, their importance (“salt of the earth” and “light of the world”), and challenges them to strive for a righteousness (that is, living in accord with God's will) superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees. The six “antitheses” (5:21–48) illustrate Jesus' claim that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets. The section on acts of piety (6:1–18) stresses performing them to serve God rather than to gain public recognition for holiness. The instructions on various matters in 6:19–7:12 take up topics such as money, social relations, and “fear” (respect, awe) of the Lord that concerned other Jewish wisdom teachers. The concluding exhortations (7:13–27) use various images—gates, ways, trees, and houses—to stress that Jesus' teachings must be put into action and not merely admired or debated.

The term “virtue ethics” may conjure up associations of “works” righteousness and piling up “merits”—the kind of moralism that Martin Luther criticized. However, the adjective “Christian” places the morality proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount in the context of gospel rather than law.<sup>4</sup> The Sermon is a great document of Christian (and Jewish) spirituality. I understand “spirituality” to mean how one stands before God and relates to others (and oneself) in light of that relationship. The Sermon provides important insights about human conduct and guidelines for responding to God's initiatives. It illustrates how Scripture can shape Christian character and community.

The three great questions of Christian virtue ethics are Who am I? What is my goal in life? and How do I get there? In this context I am an aspirant to God's kingdom,

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my goal is eternal life with God, and “ethical” teachings are helps along the way. There are no sharp tensions between law and love or between individual and community. While entering God's kingdom is the primary motivation, other motives for good actions include going to the root of biblical commands, mutual self-interest, avoiding punishment, doing the right thing, and imitating God's example. Instead of providing laws to be observed literally and rigidly, Jesus the wise teacher offers principles, analogies, extreme examples, challenges, and other staples of Jewish wisdom instructions to help aspirants to God's kingdom reach their goal.

### Anti-Judaism?

Matthew's Gospel is sometimes accused of anti-Judaism. From his infancy narrative onward, Matthew frequently points out how the Jewish Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus, thus opening the door to the charge

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4. See Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2002); and Joseph Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

of supersessionism. Moreover, the evangelist's critical remarks about "their synagogues" and the tirade against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 contribute to this impression. Also, the cry of "the people as a whole" in 27:25, "His blood be on us and on our children," would seem to clinch the case against Matthew as anti-Jewish.<sup>5</sup>

Christian teachers and preachers must admit at least the anti-Jewish potential of certain elements in Matthew's Gospel. However, whether Matthew himself was anti-Jewish is questionable. The evangelist and most (if not all) of his community seem to have been Jews by birth, knew a lot about Judaism, and identified with the biblical heritage of Israel. Indeed, they very likely regarded Jesus and themselves as the genuine heirs of the Jewish tradition.

Many scholars today find the life setting of Matthew's Gospel in the crisis precipitated by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 C.E. They interpret the harsh language in this Gospel as directed to Jesus' fellow Jews and to the Jewish groups that were rivals of Matthew's Christian Jewish community. The opportunity here lies with helping Christians today to understand better the diversity within Judaism in the first century C.E. and what was at stake in a pivotal moment in Jewish history. Several Jewish groups regarded themselves as the heirs and guarantors of the Jewish tradition: the early rabbis, the Zealot insurgents, the apocalyptists, and the Christians. Moreover, in the Greco-Roman world, the representatives of various religions and philosophies (including Jewish movements) often expressed themselves in strongly polemical terms. While we need not imitate their example, we need at least to recognize their cultural context.<sup>6</sup>

The fulfillment quotations that are so frequent in Matthew's Gospel do not mean that the Old Testament can now be ignored

or tossed away. Rather, they remind us concretely that Jesus cannot be understood without what Christians call the Old Testament. The early Christians did what other Jews of the time were doing: trying to discover the meaning and significance of biblical texts for their own day. Just as the Qumran people in the Dead Sea scrolls found the Hebrew Scriptures fulfilled in the life and history of their movement, so early Christians found in Jesus the interpretive key to many of Israel's Scriptures. Thus the problem of Matthew's alleged anti-Judaism can be turned into an opportunity for better appreciating first-century Judaism and Matthew's place within it.

### **Patriarchalism?**

In comparison with Luke and John, women are not very prominent in Matthew. In the narratives about Jesus' birth and infancy, the focus is on Joseph rather than Mary. Women are not mentioned in the list of the twelve apostles, and we learn that women accompanied Jesus and the Twelve as almost an afterthought in 27:55–56, only after we learn about Jesus' death. Most outrageously of all, in 20:20–28 Matthew shifts the blame for foolish status seeking by the sons of Zebedee from James and John (Mark 10:35–40) to their mother (Matt 20:20).

It must be admitted that Matthew is patriarchal in perspective, perhaps more so than the other evangelists. Nevertheless,

5. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

6. See J. 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 Press, 1994).

women are present at the beginning and end of Matthew's narrative of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> In the genealogy (1:1–17) Matthew interrupts the linear pattern of Jesus' male descendants by mentions of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. In various ways these unusual women prepare for the unusual and even miraculous birth of Jesus from the virgin Mary. In the account of Jesus' death and resurrection Mary Magdalene and other women are witnesses to his death and burial, as well as the empty tomb. Moreover, the first appearance of the risen Jesus is to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (28:9–10), and they are commissioned to inform the remaining male apostles to prepare for the climactic appearance in Galilee. Thus Matthew contributes to Mary Magdalene's identity as "the apostle to the apostles."

Matthew's narrative about the Canaanite woman in 15:21–28 deserves special attention from teachers and preachers. In rewriting Mark 7:24–30, Matthew resolves any ambiguity about her ethnic identity (Jew or Gentile?) by specifying her as a "Canaanite" and so clearly not a Jew. Furthermore, Matthew follows Mark in having her engage Jesus in a dialogue in which she emerges as the winner and is rewarded for her persistence by the healing of her daughter. This is the only case in Matthew or any other Gospel where Jesus seems to lose an argument. And here the victor is a pagan woman. This episode has significance not only for feminism but also for interreligious dialogue.

## Legalism?

Of all the New Testament writers, Matthew seems to be the most positively disposed toward the Mosaic law. The Matthean Jesus insists that he came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17). He insists that not one letter or part of a letter

in the law will pass away "until all is accomplished" and that whoever breaks or teaches others to break the least among the commandments will be called "least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:18–19). When Jesus defines love of God (Deut 6:4–5) and love of neighbor (Lev 19:18) as the greatest commandments, Matthew alone adds, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40). The implication is that Matthew imagined that whoever observed the two greatest commandments would naturally observe all the others.

It is likely that Matthew and his community wanted to observe the whole Mosaic law and thought that they were doing so. They represented a Jewish form of Christianity and regarded themselves as still a sect within Judaism (though other Jews may have disagreed). His form of Christianity was in tension, if not contradiction, with Pauline Christianity.<sup>8</sup> In the history of Christianity Matthew represents to some extent a road not taken or even a dead end. This recognition can help Christians today acknowledge the variety of theological voices within early Christianity and within our biblical canon.

The difficulties inherent in Matthew's position on the Mosaic law are reflected in his own Gospel. When the "righteous" Joseph in 1:19 refuses to expose his pregnant fiancée to public disgrace in accord with Deut 22:23–27, he is regarded as display-

7. See *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), and Elaine Wainwright, *Toward a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991).

8. David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

ing a better righteousness. In 5:20 the Matthean Jesus challenges his followers to pursue a “righteousness” that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. In the six antitheses (5:21–48) the Matthean Jesus comes close (in the cases of divorce, oaths, and retaliation) to abrogating parts of the Mosaic law. And in the debate about the greatest commandment it is possible to regard the double love commandment as replacing the law and the prophets. At least Paul seems to have interpreted it in that way when he wrote, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10).

Matthew portrays Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic law. In the polemic against the scribes and Pharisees Jesus is called the “one instructor, the Messiah” (23:10) as opposed to other Jewish teachers. In rewriting various parts of Mark, Matthew is careful to keep Jesus within the boundaries of the Mosaic law on matters of Sabbath observance (12:1–4; cf. Mark 2:23–3:6) and ritual purity (15:1–20; cf. Mark 7:1–23). Nevertheless, as “Emmanuel” Jesus exercises an authority that transcends the letter of the Mosaic law. That sovereignty renders ambiguous the expression “these commandments” in 5:19, the thesis statement of the Sermon on the Mount. Are they Moses’ commandments or Jesus’ commandments? The words of the risen Jesus in 28:20 (“teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”) suggests the latter.

### **Irrelevant eschatology?**

Eschatology is often a difficult topic for preachers and teachers. Many good Christians find the eschatological sections in Matthew to be foreign, irrelevant, or even embarrassing. This is ironic, since the media today assault us with disaster movies and alarming scenarios of future nuclear disaster and global warming.

Matthew’s Gospel offers a sound balance between the present and the future dimensions of eschatology.<sup>9</sup> The Lord’s Prayer (6:9–13) is the most familiar passage in Matthew’s Gospel. Christians pray it frequently, but many do not notice that it is a prayer for the full coming of God’s kingdom in the future—that is, eschatology. Its “you” petitions ask that God’s sovereignty be celebrated by all creation, and its “we” petitions beg for sustenance and protection in the dangerous process of its coming.

The parables about God’s kingdom in Matthew 13 strike a balance between present and future. Using agricultural and fishing images that would have been familiar to Jesus’ original Galilean audiences, these parables promise an abundant harvest to be accompanied by a judgment in which the good will be separated from the bad. Meanwhile, something good has already begun with Jesus’ preaching of God’s kingdom. That something is the most precious thing imaginable, and deserves full commitment. Its growth in the present is both mysterious and real.

This balance is confirmed in the Eschatological Discourse in chapters 24–25 where Matthew takes over most of Mark 13 and supplements it with several parables that emphasize the need for constant fidelity and watchfulness in the present against the horizon of the coming judgment and with a judgment scene in 25:31–46 proposing that “all the nations” (Gentiles?) will be judged according to their acts of mercy toward “the least.”

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9. See David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Alistair I. Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004).

Rather than an embarrassment, eschatology in Matthew's Gospel provides the framework for all of Christian life. We take as our goal eternal life with God, and so are aspirants to God's kingdom. If we hope to enjoy that goal we must in the present rely upon God's grace and live out our identity as Jesus' disciples with fidelity and watchfulness.

### Jesus' final despair?

In his passion narrative (27:46) Matthew follows Mark 15:34 in making Jesus' last words the first words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words have inspired many romantic and existentialist speculations about final despair on Jesus' part and much confusion among Christian believers. In order to grasp Matthew's point, teachers and preachers need to place these words in their context of the whole text of Psalm 22.

That Matthew (or Mark) thought that Jesus despaired at the moment of his death makes no sense in the context of his Gospel. Jesus remains the noble hero from birth to death. Moreover, one of Matthew's emphases in rewriting Mark's passion narrative was to expand the motif of scriptural fulfillment. Just as Jesus was fulfilling the Scriptures in his infancy and public ministry, so especially during his passion and death he was fulfilling the Scriptures, and Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 in particular.

Psalm 22 is an individual lament and thus belongs to the largest literary category in the book of Psalms. In the laments the psalmist addresses God directly ("My God, my God"), lays out (often in detail) the present sufferings, expresses trust and confidence in God, asks God to do something now, and expresses thanks (either before or after the rescue or restoration). Psalm 22 contains all these elements in abundance. After addressing God, the psalmist makes

his complaints several times (vv. 1–2, 6–8, 12–18), expresses confidence in God on the basis of Israel's past (vv. 3–5) and his personal experience (vv. 9–11), asks God to intervene in the present situation (vv. 19–21), and describes (or looks forward to) an elaborate thanksgiving celebration of his vindication (vv. 22–31).<sup>10</sup>

In dealing with Matthew's passion narrative it is important to keep in mind the whole of Psalm 22. When we read the first part of it as spoken by Jesus (as some patristic and medieval interpreters did), we can glimpse his solidarity with suffering persons throughout the centuries and his membership in their fellowship. His example can and should inspire sufferers to feel free in complaining to God and petitioning for relief. This is the stuff of genuine biblical spirituality. But the second part—about the speaker's rescue, vindication, restoration, and thanksgiving (vv. 22–31)—should not be neglected. When read in the context of Matthew's passion narrative as a whole, these words (especially the admittedly enigmatic vv. 29–31) point toward his resurrection and his promise to be with the Christian community as Emmanuel (28:20). Every problem can be an opportunity in this Year of Matthew.

10. See Daniel J. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer? A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 6–9.



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