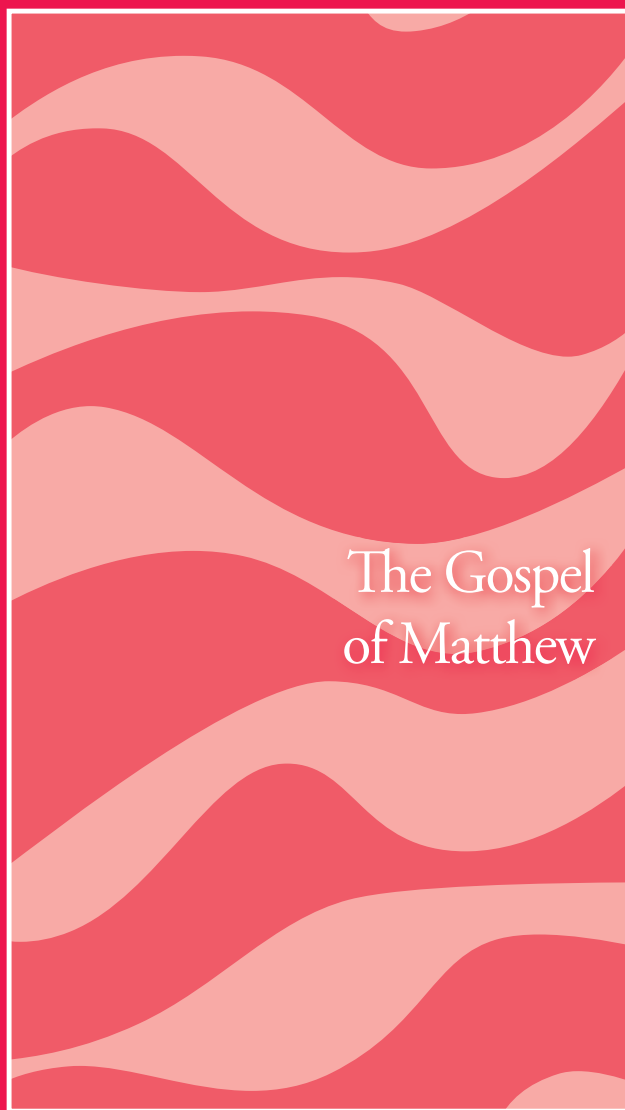


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The Gospel
of Matthew

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The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew will be the focus of attention of preachers and congregations during the new liturgical year. While its account of Jesus' life and ministry shares much with the other Synoptic Gospels, it also recounts and interprets Jesus' story in unique ways and thus makes its particular contributions to the church's interpretation of Christ and to its proclamation of the good news. Like the other Gospels, Matthew points believers to Christ and provides keen insights into the meaning of his ministry for the life and mission of the church in our time and place.

The contributors to the 2010 December issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* offer a rich diversity of perspectives on the Gospel of Matthew. **Bridget Illian** explores church discipline in Matthew and notes that witnesses to a transgression, rebukes of a defender, and expulsion were integral aspects of the disciplinary practices within the Matthean community. Thus, this community dealt with conflict resolution in ways quite similar to those of contemporary Pharisees and Essenes. Illian stresses that the goal of discipline was repentance and forgiveness. However, disciplinary procedures were also implemented in order to protect the most vulnerable within the community by identifying and stopping behavior that harmed them.

Peter Perry illustrates the influence of I Enoch on the evangelist by noting how the meaning of angels, eating and drinking, marriage, the flood, and separation is nuanced in particular ways in light of the Enochic literature. As he addresses an audience familiar with and sympathetic to the message of I Enoch, Matthew urges his readers to avoid disputes over the identity of the wicked and their relationship to the righteous. Rather than disputing, they should focus on opportunities for service.

The essay by **Anders Runesson** also examines the context within which Matthew was written, but the author's interest lies particularly in the socio-religious setting of the Gospel. He illustrates that careful attention to that setting and the setting's evidence in the text confirms that the oral traditions that were recorded in this Gospel quite likely emanated from a group that had belonged to a Pharisaic association but had separated from that association. Pharisaic Judaism thus helped shape the character and message of the Gospel.

Richard Carlson explores the evangelist's portrayal of Judas and proposes that the apostle is transformed from a villain into a tragic figure in Matthew's theological narrative. Judas is a villain as he plots with the religious leaders to

deliver Jesus to them. However, having done so, he becomes a tragic figure as he repents, confesses his sins, and longs to be forgiven. Unfortunately, instead of seeking God's forgiveness through Christ, he turns to the authorities who are neither inclined nor able to pardon him. Unable to mediate his own sins, he despairs and chooses to take his own life. In Matthew's account, the other eleven remain disciples of Christ, but Judas is excluded and is transformed from a villain into a tragic figure.

Margaret Lee approaches the Gospel of Matthew primarily from a hermeneutical perspective. She points out that scholars have not solved the interpretative challenges of Matthew, which are compounded by the selective nature of the common lectionary. However, a significant contribution of the lectionary is that it presents the Gospel to the gathered community in oral form, thereby recalling that Matthew is a collection of oral sources gathered together in a written manuscript. Like any work intended primarily for oral presentation or public performance, the Gospel of Matthew contains auditory clues. In a fascinating examination of the first narrative section and the Sermon on the Mount, Lee identifies those clues and offers interpretative suggestions.

Stories of Jesus the miracle-worker abound in Matthew, and they have traditionally been interpreted theologically, from the perspective of social boundaries or on the basis of rational criteria. However, in his essay **Warren Carter** calls attention to the material transformations that are central to these stories, especially with regard to food supply. While in the Roman Empire the elites had access to food and non-elites did not, Jesus transforms that reality. His miracles attest to God's presence and rule, reject imperial claims of material blessing, and anticipate the material abundance of God's reign. Jesus' ministry was clearly a holistic one, addressing both body and spirit.

We hope that this collection of articles will provide you with helpful insights into the context, structure, and message of Matthew. May your faithful witness of the Gospel enrich you and God's people.

Kadi Billman

Kurt K. Hendel

Mark Swanson

Editors

Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15–35

Bridget Illian

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Forgiveness is one of the foundational acts of Christian practice and theology, and nowhere is it more strongly advocated than in the Gospel of Matthew. At the same time, the Gospel of Matthew includes warnings that seem to contradict the idea of unconditional forgiveness. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, for example, we find a story where a king orders an unforgiving servant to be handed over to torture until the servant can pay every penny of his debt (Matt 18:22–35). Jesus warns that anyone who causes a little one who believes in him to stumble would be better off dead (Matt 18:6). The same chapter contains instructions for dealing with an unrepentant offender in the community: such a person should be given several rebukes and, thereby, several chances to repent—but in the end, if she or he does not listen to the community, that individual should be expelled and treated as an outsider (Matt 18:15–21). How can the same Gospel that testifies so strongly to the importance of forgiveness include stories of permanent rejection?

Part of our difficulty may be in our understanding of what forgiveness is. We tend to think of forgiveness as feeling less angry about some injury to ourselves or as excusing bad behavior without insisting on consequences for the offender. We also frequently pair forgiveness with a resolve to forget about the hurt we have just excused. Unless the difficulty is money-related, we may not even have a clear idea of what, if

anything, could have been done to repair the hurt if we did *not* excuse it and forget it.

As we will see, for people in Matthew's community, and in many other religious communities of his time, offenses were usually well-defined; consequences for them were, in theory, also well-defined; and those injured were expected to claim recourse for their hurts. Forgiveness was a concrete business of deciding not to prosecute a complaint; repentance was a matter of making restitution or, at least, desisting from causing more suffering. While giving up anger over an offense was also a necessary part of forgiveness, the internal feeling was always closely connected with an external behavior. In the light of these definitions of forgiveness and repentance, we can see that Matthew's eighteenth chapter is concerned with regulating behavior harmful to the community and that both harsh discipline and forgiveness are part of a comprehensive ethic of protection and care for the most vulnerable.

Matthew, like all the authors of the New Testament books, wrote in part to meet the pastoral needs of his immediate community. An increasing number of scholars agree that the church for whom Matthew wrote was a strongly Jewish Christian community,¹ concerned with many of

1. Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) gives a prolonged and strong argument that

the same matters with which other Jewish groups of Jesus' time were dealing. Looming large among these concerns was the question of how to live as Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the loss of Judean national autonomy to Rome.² These events forced Jewish people throughout the Roman empire, but especially closer to Jerusalem, to make choices about how they would maintain their religious and ethnic identity in an increasingly hostile world.

The Pharisees, who had already been developing a distinctive approach to Jewish religion, adapted their teachings about scripture and about keeping a temple-like purity in the family home so that they were even more centered in scripture interpretation and private religious observance.³ The Essenes, the remains of whose desert retreats and sectarian library have come to light in the form of the Qumran ruins and the Dead Sea Scrolls, did not adapt at all to the end of the Temple; it had been their great hope and reason for being, and without it, their sect disappeared entirely.⁴ Matthew's community turned to their two major sources of hope and identity: the Jewish scriptures and the matchless interpreter of scripture, Jesus.

Jewish society after the destruction of the Temple did not immediately become the rabbinic Judaism that we are familiar with today, but, even then, those Jewish communities of the first century that followed Jesus were increasingly in the

minority. Those who followed the more popular Pharisees eventually developed the kind of Judaism documented in the Mishnah and in later rabbinic Jewish writings. Matthew's community struggled with their minority status within the Jewish religion they considered their own, and this can explain some of the heat with which Matthew's Gospel denounces the "scribes and Pharisees," their intra-religious competitors. It also helps us understand Matthew's identification with the "little ones."

Matthew perceived his community as a vulnerable group of people, and the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel has a special concern for the vulnerable and the weak. This concern gives us the context for its more stern elements. Jesus advocates for care and honor of the humblest, weakest, and least orthodox members of the community. He holds up a child as an example of behavior, as one of those who are "greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:2–5) and whose "angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." (Matt 18:10) At the same time that he honors children and other "little ones," he gives terrible warnings against causing any of the little among them to stumble in faith (Matt 8:6–9). These dire warnings echo the misery in store for any person who refuses to forgive, as described in the parable of Matt 8:23–35.

Jesus also describes those in the community who are lost, like a wandering sheep, as "little," implying both that such individuals have not offended in a deliberate way and that it is the responsibility of their brothers and sisters to bring the least, lost members back into the community, and more broadly, back to safety (Matt 18:12–14). It is unclear whether "little ones" still refers literally to children or to those Christians who become humble like children. The terminology may actually be inclusive of both meanings. The concern

Matthew's community was still substantially Jewish and that much of the polemic in the Gospel of Matthew is due to intra-Jewish conflict.

2. William Scott Green and J. Andrew Overman, "Judaism (Greco-Roman Period)" 3.1041, ABD

3. *Ibid.*, 3.1043, ABD

4. *Ibid.*, 3.1043, ABD

is for the disciples to care for the “little” and the lost, not to remove them or leave them in harm’s way.

In order to ensure that this community of the small and vulnerable is able to stay together and form a positive identity, Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel gives regulations for resolving disputes in a way that protects both parties. These regulations reflect the rules and customs that were commonplace in the several first-century Judaisms, including those of the Pharisees and the Essenes. Both of these Jewish communities had regulations for resolving offenses, which called for some number of witnesses to an accusation; a series of rebukes against the offender; and a series of disciplinary measures, culminating in expulsion from the inner circles of each group or a kind of ostracism in the community.

Jesus’ regulations in Matt 18:15–21 are a variation on this general pattern of conflict resolution. Consider the parallels between Pharisaic, Essene, and Matthean approaches to rebuking someone who has given offense. The Pharisees and the Essenes both draw upon Scripture as the basis for their views, with the verse most commonly referred to being Leviticus 19:17–18:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The contrast is not between being angry versus being calm, or pusillanimous, toward someone who has caused anger or offense. Rather, this verse assumes that we all naturally become angry with another person at some time, often for good reasons, and that the best way to deal with this is by confronting the other person with

his or her offense immediately, instead of letting one’s anger fester and develop into a lasting grudge.

Another book which was almost included in the biblical canon and which was very popular in the first century C.E. in both Jewish and early Christian circles is the Wisdom of Ben Sirach. Ben Sirach meditates at length on the merits of expressing anger productively: “How much better it is to rebuke than to fume!” (Sirach 20:2) Not only does a good rebuke make the one who suffered the offense feel better, but it also helps the one who caused the anger, if he or she can own up to his or her mistake: “the one who admits his fault will be kept from failure” (Sirach 20:3). Perhaps the most eloquent praise of rebuke as conflict resolution is found in Ben Sirach 19:13–17:

Reprove a friend; perhaps he did not do it; but if he did anything, so that he may do it no more.¹⁴ Reprove a neighbor; perhaps he did not say it; or if he said it, so that he may not say it again.¹⁵ Reprove a friend, for often it is slander; so do not believe everything you hear.¹⁶ A person may make a slip without intending it. Who has never sinned with his tongue?¹⁷ Reprove your neighbor before you threaten him; and let the law of the Most High take its course.

All of these scriptural attitudes toward offense and reconciliation are reflected to varying degrees in the three traditions of discipline we are considering here. But each community took a different approach towards reproach. Among the Essenes at Qumran, before a member could bring a charge against another member to the assembly, he had to rebuke the offending party semi-privately in front of witnesses.⁵

5. Dennis C. Duling, “Matthew 18:15–17: Conflict, Confrontation, and

The function of witnesses was to confirm that the reproof had taken place, should further action be necessary. The witnesses also provided extra pressure on the one being reproofed to take the matter seriously. Members at Qumran were also warned not to accuse another member in such a way as to “relate it to his elders to make them despise him,” since this is not conflict resolution but indicated that the accuser was bearing a grudge. Anyone who made such a false and embarrassing accusation then had to bear the same punishment as the accused would have suffered, if he had been found guilty.⁶ Matthew’s community may have had similar reasons for requiring witnesses to an accusation, after the first rebuke did not result in the offender’s repentance (Matt 18:16).

The rabbinic community, which ultimately traced its roots back to the Pharisees, also had a strong preference for reproof as the first step in finding remedy for an injury. Under some conditions, it was the only acceptable measure to take. The rabbinic sages advised reproof as a means for the one who reproves to avoid holding a grudge and as a way to help the offender correct his behavior:

If one man commit a sin against another man, the one who sinned against shall not remain in silent hate against the sinner...He who beholds his fellow stooping to sin or following an unrighteous path, is obliged to return him toward the good, and to let him know that he is actually sinning against himself in pursuing wicked deeds for, it is said “And thou shalt indeed rebuke thy neighbor.”⁷

Reproof should be continued until the offender takes heed, or, barring that, almost without limit. In the Mishnah, we find this debate about reproof:

“How far shall reproof be administered? Rab said: Until he [the reprover] be beaten. Samuel said: Until he be cursed. R. Johanan said: Until he be rebuked!”⁸

Nevertheless, reproof was not primarily intended to anger the one reproofed, nor was it appropriate to use reproof to embarrass another person.⁹ In contrast to the regulations at Qumran, the rabbinic sages did not advise *public* reproof; all rebuking conversations should be private and should use “soft language” to avoid creating still more anger¹⁰ and, perhaps, to avoid someone overhearing. Witnesses were out of the question. It is worth noting that the rabbinic tradition shuns public rebuke because of concern for the reputation of the person being rebuked. The Matthean tradition shows a slightly greater concern for the injured person but still cares for the one rebuked.

Jesus speaks in Matthew’s Gospel as someone familiar with these attitudes toward rebukes and witnesses, and he embraces both practices as ways to resolve conflicts—but he uses them in ways appropriate to his own teachings about mercy and righteousness. Private reproach is still the first resort, because the aim is not to embarrass the offender but to “regain your brother.” (Matt 18:15) The next step is to bring in witnesses (Matt 18:16), perhaps

Conflict Resolution in a ‘Fictive Kin’ Association,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29, no. 1 (Spr 1999): 4-22, 14–15.

6. Ibid., 16.

7. b. Arak 16b (Babylonian Talmud, folio 16, side b). Quoted in Kenneth L.

Hanson, “The Law of Reproof: A Qumranic Exemplar of Pre-Rabbinic Halakah,” *Hebrew Studies* 47 (2006): 211–225, esp. 218.

8. Ibid., 218.

9. Ibid.; Duling, 13.

10. Hanson, 220.

for reasons much like those the Essenes had, namely, to pressure the offender to repent and to ensure that the person doing the reproaching could not ambush anyone by embarrassing them publicly without warning. The third step was to bring the offender before the whole assembly of the church (Matt 18:17). If the offender still would not repent, the assembly was to expel that person from the community (Matt 18:17).

Expulsion was a discipline of last resort in other communities, too, including early rabbinic Judaism, the Essenes, and even Paul's Gentile Christian churches, if 1 Corinthians 5:4–5 is any guide.

The rationale behind the expulsion varied across communities, and so did the possibility of being accepted back into the community. Compared to the Essenes, or even the Pharisees, Matthew's community was more ready to accept people back in after they had offended, been expelled, and finally repented. We learn from Josephus that the Essenes were less forgiving of expelled members, although they also practiced mercy:

Those who are convicted of serious crimes they [the Essenes] expel from the order; and the ejected individual often comes to a most miserable end. For, being bound by their oaths and usages, he is not at liberty to partake of men's food, and so falls to eating grass and wastes away and dies of starvation. This has led them in compassion to receive many back in the last stage of exhaustion, deeming that torments which have brought them to the verge of death are a sufficient penalty for their misdoings.¹¹

11. Josephus, *Bellum* II 145. In Göran Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity*, trans. Pearl Sjölander (Lund: Studentlittera-

The offenses the Essenes considered worthy of expulsion could be ethical but might also have been any of the dozens of listed offenses, major or minor, against rules pertaining to ritual purity or respect for their hierarchy.¹²

The early rabbinic community also found it necessary at times to ostracize one of their members. From their records we learn very little about what kind of offenses could result in such a ban, although one such offense was becoming a tax collector.¹³ Banned individuals were expected to dress like a mourner or a leper. They were forbidden to cut their hair, to wash their clothes, to bathe, to wear sandals in town, or to walk about with an uncovered head. They were also considered unclean like a leper. Hence, one had to keep a distance of four cubits from banned individuals and could not eat with them.¹⁴ Göran Forkman notes that, in practice, it must have been difficult for banned persons to carry on business, since only their immediate family could come near them, and that the physical distancing from all other associates must have been psychologically painful.¹⁵

Nevertheless, a person under such a ban was still considered by the rabbis to be part of the Jewish people. Men under the ban still had access to the temple, at least in theory, and in principle could even receive instruction and teach. The ban was also temporary, and, although it was possible to die while still under the ban, it could also be lifted after the minimum period of

ture, 1972), 69.

12. 4Q266, 270, *Damascus Document*; 4Q266, fr 10, *Damascus Document*

13. This quotation is from Tos Dem III 4 (49), translation by Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community*, 90.

14. *Ibid.*, 100–101.

15. *Ibid.*, 101.

thirty days, if the banned person repented of his or her offense.¹⁶ The ultimate goal of such a partial expulsion was the offender's repentance and re-inclusion. There is no discussion of how many times a person could be received back, though, presumably, one episode of living as an outcast in one's own community would have been enough to act as a lasting deterrent.

We can imagine that Matthew's church used the threat of a ban or expulsion in a similar way. This is almost certainly the kind of discipline called for in Matt 18:17. It is possible to argue that the injunction, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," means that the offender was to be treated as an object of mission, but this would be a more appropriate interpretation if Gentiles had a better reputation in Matthew's Gospel. There is one positive role for Gentiles to play: they are foils for those of "little faith," Jesus' Jewish followers. The Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion are both Gentiles for whom Jesus effects a healing of a child at a distance because of the woman's and centurion's great faith.

More often, though, Gentiles are examples of poor behavior (Matt 5:47, 6:7, 6:32, 20:25) or are flatly hostile to Jesus and his followers (Matt 10:18, 20:19). During Jesus' earthly ministry, he directs his disciples to avoid ministering to Gentiles (Matt 10:5), only authorizing a mission to the Gentiles after his resurrection (Matt 28:19) in the famous Great Commission. Gentiles, like tax collectors, may be in need of what Jesus and his followers have to offer, but they are not yet part of the community and are certainly not initiated into the correct way to live. In short, "tax collectors and Gentiles" are outsiders in Matthew's Gospel and to treat someone as such is to regard them as outsiders too.

Crucially, it is only *after* the discussion

of how the community will set its ethical limits (Matt 18:18) and enforce those limits (Matt 18:15–17) that Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother or sister, and Jesus replies with "seventy-seven times," a practically limitless number of pardons (Matt 18:21–22). Forgiveness does not apply outside the ethical framework of the community; the one who offends is expected to repent when reproached for his or her faults. Forgiveness in this part of the Gospel of Matthew is conditional; it can be repeated endlessly, but not without repentance.

Conditional forgiveness might seem to pose a difficulty for Lutheran theology, if it is understood to impose repentance as a work necessary for salvation. But we should remember that it is the forgiveness of the community and of the person hurt by the offending party that is conditional in Matthew's Gospel. Nowhere does Matthew say or quote Jesus as saying that there is no salvation for an offender without the community's forgiveness. God still has the prerogative to forgive anyone.

The community, for its part, has the prerogative to regulate what kind of behavior is tolerable within its social circle and to declare some behavior intolerably harmful and therefore worthy of discipline. The community retains the power to bind and to loose, (Matt 18:18) a term from first-century Judaism that means that the community has the authority to decide when, how, and whether a particular commandment of Scripture is applicable in a given situation.¹⁷ The guiding principle in Matthew's Gospel for deciding what is allowed and what is forbidden is that of protecting the most vulnerable in

17. Mark Allan Powell, "Binding and Loosing: a Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30 no. 6 (December 2003): 438–445.

16. *Ibid.*, 101–102.

the community, the little ones and those who have in some way wandered off and become lost (Matt 18:5–6, 10, 14).

The parable of the unforgiving servant, which follows immediately after the teachings on church discipline and forgiveness, should give pause to anyone tempted to use the community's authority abusively. A king forgives his servant's unpayable debt after the servant promises to repay him, if he will only be patient. However, that same servant does not forgive the debt his fellow servant owes him but has the man thrown in prison. The king then revokes his forgiveness and has the unforgiving servant also thrown in prison (Matt 18:22–35). The first servant was not forgiven without begging for the king's patience and promising to make good on his debts. Hence, this is not a story of unconditional forgiveness. But it does warn us against withholding forgiveness after someone has expressed a heartfelt will to repair the harm she or he has done.

These teachings on setting ethical limits and practicing forgiveness are needed in today's church just as much as they were in Matthew's time, if for different reasons. In churches across North America and Europe (and probably beyond) we are facing the legacy of church discipline and unconditional forgiveness gone wrong. Elaine Ramshaw frames the matter well when she discusses power dynamics and forgiveness in Matthew 18. Some churches have used the power of expulsion in Matthew 18:17 to permanently remove people for ideological differences.¹⁸ However,

Matthew is trying to regulate damaging *behavior* and would have regarded someone with heterodox beliefs as one of those wandering sheep in need of rescue.

In far too many churches women and children who have suffered abuse at the hands of parents, spouses, family, and even church officials have been urged to forgive the offenders unconditionally and, in cases of spouses, to continue to live with them.¹⁹ Instead of taking allegations of abuse seriously and becoming the witnesses that the most vulnerable members of our communities need, too many church communities have turned the intent of Matthew 18 on its head and pressured victims to be silent or to leave. We all need to reclaim the power and responsibility to define the ethical boundaries of our churches in such a way as to protect the most vulnerable. We may need to adjust some of the details of witnessing and accountability to make these instructions practical for each local situation, but the general intent of Matthew 18 is clear: discipline and forgiveness must work for the wholeness of the little and the lost.

18. Elaine J. Ramshaw, "Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18," *Word & World* 18 no. 4 (1998): 397–404, esp. 397.

19. There are almost too many documented instances of this to count, but Elaine Ramshaw, in "Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18," is a scholar who takes note of the problem. An impressive (and depressing) catalogue of articles on church sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church—although the problem is not confined to Roman Catholicism—can be found at the *New York Times* Web site, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/r/roman_catholic_church_sex_abuse_cases/index.html.

Disputing Enoch: Reading Matthew 24:36–44 with Enochic Judaism

Peter S. Perry

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But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matt 24:36–44)

In their magisterial three-volume ICC commentary on Matthew, W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison remark in a footnote, “how could ‘marrying and giving in marriage’ (cf. 22.30), when used of Noah’s generation, not have brought to mind the many legends surrounding the giants of Gen 6:4?”¹ For someone who knows the

legends of the heavenly Watchers who descended and married human women and had giants for children, the connection is obvious, although Davies and Allison do not spell out its significance.

Many do not know these legends or the Enochic literature that preserved them. Davies and Allison assume that Matthew’s ancient audiences and their modern audiences knew the legends of the Watchers and could infer their significance for interpreting Matthew. For some modern readers of Matthew, they assume too much. I was discussing this text with a retired pastor and mentioned how “Noah,” “angels,” and “marrying” lead me to think of *1 Enoch*, and he asked me, “What’s *1 Enoch*?”

The purpose of this essay is to familiarize readers with Enochic literature and explore its significance for Matt 24:36–44.² Whenever Noah and the flood are mentioned in the Bible, readers should consider whether *1 Enoch* is relevant. In Matt 24:36–44, the mention of Noah, eating and drinking, marriage, flood, knowledge of angels, and separation take on new significance when read with *1 Enoch*. Specifically, this pericope draws on Enochic Judaism’s expectation of a Noah-like savior at the end of time and the continuing influence of Watcher’s sin,

2. Matt 24:37–41 is paralleled in Luke 17:26–36 and Matt 24:43–44 in Luke 12:39–40. For discussion of the source critical issues, see Davies and Allison, 3:375–376, and U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 211–212.

1. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols; London: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:380 n.46.

including violence, oppression by leaders and rulers, and the sinful eating of meat with the blood. While appealing to these aspects of Enochic Judaism, Matthew joins a contemporary dispute about whether the righteous and wicked exist side-by-side in the community and whether it is possible to distinguish the two. Like other parables of separation (e.g., the wheat and the weeds, net, foolish and wise bridesmaids, sheep and goats), Matt 24:36–44 presents the righteous and wicked side-by-side in the church, indiscernible until the moment of judgment. Instead of identifying who is saved or damned or when judgment will come, Matthew refocuses an audience sympathetic to *1 Enoch* to “keep watch” on serving those in need in the present.

1 Enoch, the Essenes and Qumran

The Pharisees and Sadducees are well-known groups from the New Testament, but the Essenes are not mentioned by New Testament authors. We know of their existence because of references by the first century C.E. Jewish writers Josephus and Philo of Alexandria and the Gentile writers Pliny the Younger and Dio “Chrysostom” of Prusa. Josephus and Philo report that the Essenes were spread throughout the towns and villages of Palestine. Recently, K. Atkinson and J. Magness reaffirmed the scholarly consensus that the community at Qumran near the Dead Sea, mentioned by Pliny and Dio, was a community of Essenes.³

3. K. Atkinson and J. Magness, “Josephus’s Essenes and the Qumran Community,” *JBL* 129.2 (2010): 317–342. The Qumran-Essene hypothesis was first proposed by E. L. Sukenik, *Megillot Genuzor: Mi-tokh Genizah Kedumah she-Nimtse’ah be-Midbar Yehudah* (2 vols; Jerusalem Bialik, 1948). The “Groningen Hypothesis,” proposed by P. R. Davies and F. García Martínez, asserts the Qumran community was the result of a split

Enochic Literature was highly valued by the Essene community at Qumran.⁴ Among the scrolls found at Qumran, eleven manuscripts of parts of *1 Enoch* were found, along with nine fragments of the Book of the Giants, which tells the story of the giant children of the Watchers and human women. There were also eight fragments of the book of *Jubilees*, which is dependent on traditions in *1 Enoch*.⁵ *1 Enoch*, the book of Giants, and *Jubilees* have been found outside Qumran, but their concentration there has led G. Boccacchini to suggest Qumran and the Essenes are representatives of Enochic Judaism, a movement of Jews who valued Enochic literature as true and authoritative for their communities.⁶

within the Essene movement. J. J. Collins affirms the Qumran-Essene hypothesis but rejects a split between Qumran and other Essene communities, see *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 209.

4. G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 76–77.

J. VanderKam has shown that the Essenes at Qumran did not lose interest in Enochic Literature, as sometimes has been claimed. See “Apocalyptic Tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls* J. J. Collins and R. A. Kugler, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 121.

5. Also influenced by Enochic traditions at Qumran: the Genesis Apocryphon, 1Q19, 4Q180–181, 4Q247, the Damascus Document (see CD 2:16–20), Aramaic Levi, 1QH 12:29–40.

6. *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For a critique of Boccacchini’s hypothesis, see J. J. Collins, “‘Enochic Judaism’ and the Sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *The Early Enoch Literature*, G. Boccacchini and J. J. Collins, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 283–300.

First Enoch is a composite document of seven parts composed and assembled beginning in the Persian period and completed in the 1st century C.E.⁷ It was originally written in Aramaic and translated into Greek, and from Greek into Ethiopic. The only version we have of the entire 108 chapters is in Ethiopic. The seven parts of *1 Enoch* are:

1. **The Book of the Watchers (chs 1–36)** tells the story of the revolt of the heavenly Watchers (“sons of God”) based on Gen 6:4 and Enoch’s commissioning and cosmic journeys. Enoch, Noah’s grandfather, sees the future judgment of the Watchers and the cleansing of the earth by the flood. This book was completed by the middle of the third century B.C.E. Seven Aramaic manuscripts of this book have been found at Qumran.
2. **The Book of Parables (chs 37–71)** recounts Enoch’s cosmic journeys and, most important for New Testament research, describes scenes of judgment presided over by a heavenly figure called the Righteous One, Elect One, Anointed One and Son of Man. This is the latest composition in *1 Enoch*, probably the late first century B.C.E. or early first century C.E. This book has not been found at Qumran, and no Aramaic or Greek fragments of this book have been found.
3. **The Book of the Luminaries⁸ (chs 72–82)** establishes the authority of the solar calendar in subtle opposition to the lunar calendar. It has its roots in the fourth century B.C.E. and may be the oldest unit of *1 Enoch*. Four Aramaic manuscripts have been

found at Qumran.

4. **The Dream Visions (chs 83–90)** has two parts. First, Enoch tells his son Methuselah about his vision of the flood (83–84) and then he describes the history of the world from Adam to the final judgment using an allegory of animals. This latter vision focuses on Judas Maccabees as the “great horn” who opened the peoples’ eyes to finally see (ca. 165 B.C.E.). Three Aramaic manuscripts have been found at Qumran, one with fragments of the Book of Watchers, the Epistle of Enoch, and the Birth of Noah (4QEn^c).
5. **The Epistle of Enoch (chs 92–105)** is a testament to Enoch’s children and his spiritual descendants to stand fast as they wait for the promised judgment. It was composed in the second century B.C.E. In addition to two Aramaic manuscripts in Cave 4, two Greek fragments were discovered in Cave 7.
6. **The Birth of Noah (chs 106–107)** describes Noah’s miraculous birth and promises salvation for the righteous. One manuscript was found at Qumran that included this book (4QEn^c).
7. **“Another Book of Enoch” (ch 108)** recapitulates earlier themes. As with the Book of Parables, this book has not been found at Qumran.

Throughout, Enoch and Noah have critical roles. Enoch has the unique and privileged position as the righteous prophet who receives the pure revelation before the Watchers’ rebellion contaminated humanity. The Watchers and their giant children influence later humanity—notably leaders and prophets—and by implication taint later revelation. Noah is the leader of the righteous remnant following the flood that

7. Nickelsburg, 9.

8. Also known as the “Astronomical Book.”

brought judgment on the Watchers and their children. Noah is an archetype for an eschatological leader, and the flood is an archetype for the judgment that will come at the end of the age to fully purify humanity and the earth from the effects of the Watchers' rebellion.

First Enoch was widespread and influential among some Jewish communities up to the destruction of the temple

To an audience familiar with Enochic Judaism, Jesus is the promised Noah-like figure to lead the righteous remnant.

and remained so to a lesser extent among Christian communities.⁹ The author of *Jude* quotes *1 En* 1:9 explicitly.

It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (*Jude* 14–15).

Although filled with references to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish traditions, *Jude* gives prominence to *1 Enoch* by quoting

9. See Nickelsburg, 71–101.

it directly. *Enoch* continued to be quoted authoritatively by Christians until it was rejected by opponents to millennialism.¹⁰

Scholars have found indirect references to *1 Enoch* in Matthew's Gospel.¹¹ Most prominently, the use of the term "Son of Man" as heavenly vindicator of the oppressed in Matthew (based on Mark and Q) is close to the way the Book of Parables interprets Daniel 7.¹² D. Sim builds on the work of R. Rubinkiewicz to argue that Matt 22:13a ("Bind him hand and foot...") is dependent on *1 En* 10:4a, "Bind Azaz'el hand and foot and throw him into the darkness!"¹³ To an audience familiar with Enochic Judaism, the man who lacks a garment in Matt 22:13 is compared to Azaz'el, leader of the Watchers, who has forfeited his heavenly garment and has been cast into darkness. G. W. E. Nickelsburg also suggests the direction of this essay, that Enochic traditions have influenced the saying in Matt 24:37–39, "where the days of the Son of Man are likened to the days of Noah."¹⁴

10. *Barnabas* 4:3; Tertullian, *De cult. fem.* 1.2, *De idolatria*; implicitly in Justin, *Second Apology* 5.2; Athenagoras, *Leg.* 24–25; Iranaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.16.2.

11. In addition, D. E. Orton concludes that Enoch prefigured Matthew as a "scribe of righteousness" and "authoritative transmitter of revealed mysteries." See *The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ideal* (London: T&T Clark, 1984), 95.

12. Nickelsburg, 83.

13. D. C. Sim, "Matthew 22.13a and 1 Enoch 10.4a: A case of Literary Dependence?" *JSNT* 47 (1992): 3–19. R. Rubinkiewicz, *Die Eschatologie von Henoch 9-11 und das Neue Testament* (Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1984), 97–113. Cf. Nickelsburg, 84.

14. Nickelsburg, 83.

Matthew 24:36–44 and Enochic Judaism

What signals does Matthew give that suggest he is interacting with Enochic Judaism in Matt 24:36–44? The phrases “the days of Noah” and the “days before the flood” point the audience toward Enochic Judaism. In Enochic literature Noah is the figure who initiates judgment and future salvation and is a prototype of eschatological judgment and salvation. Nickelsburg writes, “As is typical of the Enochic material, the sin, judgment, and renewal at the time of Noah will be replicated at the eschaton, when God will judge a thoroughly perverse and sinful world, deliver a righteous few, and usher in an era of perfect and full righteousness and blessing.”¹⁵ In Matt 24:35–39, Jesus makes a similar comparison between Noah and his era and the Son of Man and the eschaton. A salvific figure comes in a sinful time to initiate judgment for all and salvation for some. To an audience familiar with Enochic Judaism, Jesus is the promised Noah-like figure to lead the righteous remnant.

When read without *1 Enoch*, the phrase “they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” (24:38) suggests people were engaging in everyday activities ignorant of coming judgment. Davies and Allison comment that this phrase “implies that even in the midst of the eschatological tribulation life will for many continue as ever.”¹⁶ Luz agrees, “The people of that day, in the time before the flood, lived their daily lives.... They suspected nothing.”¹⁷ This interpretation is consistent with the overall framework of ignorance of imminent judgment. But

does it explain the particular details in the comparison with Noah and his times?

An audience familiar with Enochic literature will hear the phrase “they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” as referring to the sin of the heavenly Watchers and its consequences on humanity. This phrase strengthens the conclusion that Matthew is interacting with Enochic Judaism, as Davies and Allison noted but did not explain.

The focus on marriage in the days of Noah signals audiences to think of heavenly Watchers marrying human women. The core tradition in the Book of the Watchers begins by closely quoting Gen 6:1–2,

And when the sons of men had multiplied, in those days, beautiful and comely daughters were born to them. And the watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them. And they said to one another, “Come, let us choose for ourselves wives from the daughters of men, and let us beget for ourselves children” (*1 En* 6:1).¹⁸

This is the origin of evil for Enochic Judaism: that heavenly beings crossed the boundary between heaven and earth and brought sin into the world. Evil, sin, and violence entered the world when the Watchers married and human women were given in marriage.

“Eating and drinking” also takes a specific meaning in Enochic Judaism. The giant children of the Watchers are violent and insatiable. Contrary to the law given to Noah to eat meat without the blood (Gen 9:4–5; *Jub* 6:5–10), they murder and eat flesh and drink blood.

They were devouring the labor of all the sons of men, and men were not able to

15. Nickelsburg, 539–540.

16. Davies and Allison, 3:381.

17. Luz, 214.

18. Translation from Nickelsburg, 174. Except where noted, all translations from *1 Enoch* are from Nickelsburg.

supply them. And the giants began to kill men and to devour them. And they began to sin against the birds and beasts and creeping things and the fish, and to devour one another's flesh. And they drank the blood (*1 En* 7:3–5).

In the context of Noah and the days before the flood, the phrase “eating and drinking” refers to the violent, gluttonous and abominable giants, the children of the Watchers.

Other Enochic literature applies the theme of eating and drinking to the spiritual descendants of the giants, people who eat and drink disobediently and ungratefully.¹⁹ The Epistle of Enoch announces a woe against them.

Woe to you, stiff-necked and hard of heart, who do evil and consume blood. From where do you have good things to eat and drink and be satisfied? From all the good things that the Lord, the Most High, has abundantly provided upon the earth. You will have no peace. (*1 En* 98:11).

Jubilees underlines violence as well as eating and drinking of blood as a consequence of the giants, whom *Jubilees* calls “demons.” People are warned even against eating with others who do not follow Jewish dietary rules about blood.

For I see, and behold, the demons have begun to mislead you and your children. And now I fear for your sakes, that after I die you will pour out the blood of men upon the earth. And you will be blotted out from the surface of the earth....And you will not be like the one who eats with blood, but beware lest they should eat before you (*Jub* 7:27, 31).²⁰

19. Nickelsburg, 485.

20. Translation from O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees” in *OTP* 2:70. Cf. *Jub*

When Jesus says “eating and drinking” in the days of Noah, he is referring to more than simply everyday life; he uses a well-developed tradition in Enochic Judaism. He draws on an Enochic analysis that links violence and evil in society with eating and drinking of meat with the blood, apart from the dietary regulations of Judaism and the peace and provision from God. To an audience sympathetic to *1 Enoch*, Jesus offers himself as a Noah-like figure in an age of violence and idolatrous consumption.

One taken, one left: Matthew 24:40–41

Reading Matt 24:36–44 in the context of Enochic Judaism also helps to explain the saying in vv. 40–41 about two men in the field and two women grinding meal. Scholars agree this saying emphasizes how one cannot judge by external appearance. “God’s judgment annuls external similarities,” write Davies and Allison.²¹ But if the overall point is the suddenness and lack of knowledge of the timing of judgment (24:36), why make the separate point about external similarities? The point of vv. 40–41 seems to stress that Christians cannot tell *among themselves* who will be left or taken.²²

The saying about one taken and one left joins a debate within Enochic Judaism regarding social dualism. In Enochic Judaism, the cosmos is divided between God and the forces that oppose God (the Watchers, Belial, Asael/Azazel, evil spirits of the giants, etc.). How does this cosmic dualism translate into society and the be-

6:12–14; 21:6, 18–20.

21. Davies and Allison, 3:382. Also Luz, 214–215.

22. Luz, 215; C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 65.

living community? Are those inside the community righteous and separated from wicked outsiders? Or, is the community made of both righteous and sinful people? And on a related note, is it possible for humans to discern whether one is righteous or wicked based on external behavior and characteristics? At least three positions emerged in this debate within Enochic Judaism.

First, human beings have all been contaminated and led astray by the sin of the Watchers. No one is free of their taint. People sin because the Watchers and their Giant children lead them astray (esp. *1 En* 8).²³ Even the flood did not wipe out their evil influence.²⁴ The only difference between the Enochic community and other communities is that Enochic Jews know the truth about their situation.²⁵ This is often reflected in the emphasis on sight.²⁶ Enoch sees the truth and conveys it to the community. Even knowing the truth, the Enochic community is mixed with sinner and righteous because they cannot escape the Watchers' sin and the power of their giant children. The only hope is when the divine Judge will descend from heaven and execute judgment.²⁷

A second position gave more respon-

23. In *1 En* 12–16, the ghosts of the dead giants are evil spirits who plague humans. The point here too is the helplessness of humanity in the face of such pressure. See Nickelsburg, 40–41.

24. The Animal Apocalypse in the Dream Visions shows all kinds of “beasts” born after the flood (*1 En* 89:10).

25. G. W. E. Nickelsburg, “Enochic Wisdom and the Mosaic Torah” in *The Early Enoch Literature* G. Boccaccini and J. J. Collins, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 83.

26. *1 En* 19:3. The theme of sight is important in the Dream Visions; see *1 En* 89:28, 73; 90:6, 35.

27. Boccaccini, 74.

sibility to human beings, and especially the leaders and those who are wealthy. In the Dream Visions, the “shepherds” are accused of allowing beasts to eat the “sheep” (*1 En* 90:1–5). Later Enochic Jews who wrote the addition to the Epistle of Enoch (*1 En* 94:6–104:6) emphasized woes against the rich who oppress the poor and forget God. The Book of Parables specifically accuses the “kings, the governors, the high officials and the landlords” (*1 En* 62) who have had their eyes closed but at the time of judgment will see and recognize the Elect One. *1 Enoch* holds these human leaders responsible, even as it acknowledges they have been led astray by the Watchers and the evil spirits of the giants (cf. *1 En* 55:4; 53:5). The implication is that the community is righteous and separated from the wicked, and human beings can discern the wicked based on their deeds.²⁸

A third position, held by those at Qumran, locates the dualism within the individual, not as the result of the Watchers' sin but created by God. God gives each person a spirit of light and a spirit of darkness (1QS 3.17–4.25). “[God] placed within [the human] two spirits so that he would walk with them until the moment of his visitation: they are the spirits of truth and of deceit” (1QS 3.18).²⁹ There are no pure people and, as a result, no pure community. The community is made of people who have simultaneously righteous

28. “(So) we will vanish away from before his face on account of our deeds; and all our sins are consumed by righteousness. Furthermore, at that time, you shall say, ‘Our souls are satiated with exploitation money which could not save us from being cast into the oppressive Sheol’ (*1 En* 63:9–10; trans. E. Isaac in “1 Enoch,” *OTP* 1:44).

29. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* 2 vols; F. García Martínez & E. J. C. Tiscchelaar, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:75.

and wicked spirits. However, the ratio of spirits can be discerned. A fragment of a scroll describes three people's physical characteristics, astronomical sign, and wealth with their ratio of spirits. Of one person it concludes, "His spirit has six (parts) in the house of light and three in the house of darkness." Of the other two it writes, "His spirit has [ei]ght (parts) in the house [of darkness] and one in the

foolish and wise bridesmaids wait together for the coming bridegroom (25:1–13), and both sheep and goats are gathered together before the Son of Man in glory (25:31–46). With those at Qumran, Matthew's community is composed of both righteous and sinner.³¹ With Enochic Jews who insisted on human responsibility while blaming powerful cosmic forces for evil, Matthew emphasizes the care for the poor and helpless as signs of true piety (25:35–36) while blaming the evil one for sowing weeds among the wheat. Matt 24:40–41 continues the theme of eschatological separation of righteous and wicked who are in the community: one is taken and one is left.

In contrast to the Essenes at Qumran and other Enochic Jews, Matthew disputes the assertion that humans can discern who will be left and who will be taken. The two men on the road and the two women grinding meal are identical in their external appearance and activity, and yet only one will be protected. The difference between the two is only made clear in the moment of eschatological judgment. No amount of measuring another person's physical characteristics, birth sign, use of wealth, or behavior will reveal their fate.

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house of light" (4Q186; cf. 4Q561).³⁰ Although the community is mixed, it is possible for human beings to determine the precise balance of light and darkness within a person.

Matthew's Gospel agrees with the social dualism that separates the righteous and wicked but asserts that the believing community contains both. The parable of the wheat and the weeds (13:24–30; 13:36–43) and the net (13:48) describe the believing community as having both "children of heaven" and "children of the evil one" (13:38) and "fish of every kind," good and bad (13:47–48). Likewise, both

31. With U. Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 255. Davies and Allison (2:408–409) disagree. For them, the problem is the mystery of unbelief, which can be explained by the struggle between God and Satan. However, this does not exclude the question of social dualism, which is a corollary to cosmic dualism. They also interpret 18:15–20 to argue that Matthew's community did pull up Christian weeds; but dealing with unrepentant sin in community is not the same as measuring a person's eschatological fate.

30. *Ibid.*, 1:381, 383.

Keeping watch rather than speculating

The overall point of Matt 24:36–44 is that believers should avoid speculation about the day and hour of judgment (24:36). In an *inclusio*, the end of the pericope (24:42–44) reinforces this theme with a parable about a home owner who would keep watch if he knew what part of the night a thief would break in. He knows a little about when it will happen, the general part of the night, but not the details. The implication is that Jesus' disciples have enough information and should not try to know more. Jesus urges them to keep watch, not speculate.

Within the theme of keeping watch rather than indulging speculative knowledge, Matthew encourages his community to avoid trying to discern who will be taken and who will be left behind. One could rephrase the theme verse (24:36) to read, "But about the ultimate fate of another person, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father... Keep awake, therefore." The refusal to seek restricted knowledge speaks directly to Enochic concerns. The angels in Enochic Judaism had access to knowledge about weapons, sorcery, and pharmacology and led humans astray with that knowledge. In Matthew's view no angel knows the day or the hour of judgment or the fate of any person, with the implication that those who claim such knowledge should not be trusted.

While drawing on Enochic suspicion of knowledge transmitted by angels, Matthew addresses the Enochic tendency, perhaps the human tendency, to measure another person's righteousness. There are "wheat" and "weeds" in Matthew's community, "good fish" and "bad fish," "wise bridesmaids" and "foolish bridesmaids," "sheep" and "goats." Some want to separate the righteous and wicked now saying, "do

you want us to go and separate them?" (cf. 13:28). But Matthew insists it is not for humans to know, and the attempt to decide may damage the righteous. "No; for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them" (13:29). The time for separation is at the final judgment, not in the life of the community. "Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gathered the wheat into my barn'" (13:30).

Instead of speculating about someone else's righteousness, Matthew urges each believer to "keep awake" (24:42). What it means to keep awake is made obvious in the parable of the sheep and goats (25:31–46), another parable of eschatological separation. The basis for separation is care for the poor and needy. The works of piety that keep one awake are providing food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, welcome for the stranger, clothes for the naked, care for the sick, and visitation for the prisoner. While the Watchers' insatiable appetite led them to idolatrous eating and drinking, serving Christ leads one to help another eat and drink enough to live.

Conclusion

To an audience sympathetic to Enochic Judaism, Noah is a hero, a type of the one who will lead a righteous remnant at the eschaton. Matthew addresses this audience, drawing parallels with Noah, idolatrous and violent eating and drinking, the Watchers' marriage to human women, and the resulting decline of humanity that requires God's radical judgment. While an Enochic audience agrees with this assessment, Matthew uses this pericope to urge them not to judge for themselves about the day, hour and people's fate, but to leave judgment to God.

Behind the Gospel of Matthew: Radical Pharisees in Post-War Galilee?

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Introduction: We need a body to locate a soul

The reception of the Gospel of Matthew was very successful in the early centuries, at least judging from its popularity, its influence, and the variety of settings in which this text was read, heard, and interpreted. It comes as no surprise that Matthew is the first Gospel of the New Testament canon. Further, the diverse interpretation of Matthew through the centuries up to our own days certainly reminds us that we are not objective readers, neither were those who went before us. Studying reception history certainly helps us to put our own ideas about this Gospel in perspective.¹ What seems to us to be obvious interpretations

1. For treatment of specific passages and their history of interpretation, see the important three-volume commentary by Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989–2005). See also Howard Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). The function of such reception historical studies for those who are interested in the earliest period in which the Gospel was formed is rather to destabilize our own feelings that we already know rather well what the text means. By noting the diversity of interpretation of the Gospel through the centuries, we prepare to meet the unexpected, as we proceed to analyse the situation in the first century.

of almost any passage of the Gospel are often shown to be heavily dependent on our own modern worldview and cultural context when we become aware of how the same passages were interpreted in previous centuries. This reminds us of the fact that we always read from a certain place and that nothing floats freely in time and space; we are anchored rather firmly in our own time. But, we may add, so were the Gospel writers, and this opens up for us the possibility of attempting to reach back in time to be enriched by their understandings of the Jesus event, even though our historical tools are not sharp enough to provide one hundred percent certainty that we always reach our goal in this regard. However willing we are—or are not—to recognize our historical ability, it quickly becomes clear as we undertake such labor aimed at first century understandings of the postmodern doctrine that, after its production, almost anything can happen to a text, is easily confirmed.

How do we reach, then, probable readings that would reflect thinking around the Jesus event that took place 2000 years ago? The principles for such study must be the same as for any historical study of the understanding of the Gospel, including its reception in later history. We would have to pay particular attention to the reflections of socio-religious, economic, political and other aspects of society, which trickle through and mani-

fest themselves in the text. Such aspects must by definition be those of the original context, and, if we are dealing with a text that came into being through a process over time, possibly earlier contexts which may have left marks in the text.

I am mentioning this since some recent scholarship has tended to emphasize that the Gospels were not written for specific communities but for all Christ-believers everywhere. This would make it difficult, they claim, to reconstruct a community in which a specific Gospel was authored, since the aim would be supra-local.² However, against such a position it may be argued that the individual authors would have had little or no knowledge of the specifics of other geographical and political settings. We cannot assume that they would have been able to insert details of such settings in their texts with the aim of adapting it for a universal audience. Rather, as with all texts, local circumstances and conditions would consciously or unconsciously but necessarily have made their way, to a greater or lesser extent, into the written product. If we aim at focusing on such aspects, we may well be able to reconstruct, more broadly, the original settings of the Gospel texts, since later circumstances or conditions would not make it into a text that has already been produced. In this sense, the text freezes time and culture, so to speak.

Regardless of intended audiences, by reading the text itself we may therefore always be able to say at least something about the context in which the text was produced, but never much about the places where it was intended to be read, if such intentions pointed beyond the local context.

2. See especially Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), and the debate that followed.

The original setting(s) in which the text was produced thus have explanatory force when we try to reach conclusions about how the text was first understood, since no reading or interpretation happens in a vacuum. We understand, and the ancients understood, from a certain place, within a certain mindset, that was—and still is—intertwined with lived realities. The socialization of our brains is always heavily involved both when we produce text and when we struggle to understand text.

This leaves the historian little choice. In order to understand text, we need to reconstruct context. In order to find a soul, we need a body. If we aim at understanding mediaeval European interpretations of Matthew in church art, for example, we need to reconstruct the socio-historical setting in which this art was produced. If we want to understand the production and meaning of Matthew's Gospel in the first century, we need to reconstruct a context in which the text "happened." This is, in my view, a methodological necessity; it is an entirely different matter that such reconstructions are hard to achieve and that they are always to some degree hypothetical.

The point is that when we aim for historical understandings of a text we have no choice other than to proceed from context and hope that there is enough extra-textual evidence that may be used to reconstruct that context, so that we may avoid circular reasoning (i.e., a situation in which we reconstruct a context using only the text, and then use that context to understand the text). The alternative to contextual methodology condemns us to the shadowy world where anachronism rules. The soul cannot exist without the body, at least not in academia.

I am mentioning all this to emphasize, in light of recent debate in Matthean studies, that Matthew needs to be read

in a convincingly reconstructed social and political setting in order for us—in the twenty-first century—to make first-century sense of the various parts of the Gospel as well as the Gospel as a whole. The problem is, of course, the difficulties involved in pinning down the location where the Gospel of Matthew was produced, which is part of the necessary information without which we cannot proceed. The scholarly opinions on the topic are legion. Traditionally, Antioch in Syria has been suggested as a possible hypothesis. Lately, however, there are a growing number of strong voices claiming that the text mirrors conditions in Galilee better than they mirror Syrian Antioch.³

Regarding the many arguments that have been put forward in favor of Galilee, I would like to call attention to the

3. See, e.g., J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990); *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (New Testament in Context; Valley Forge: TPI, 1996), 16–19; Anthony J. Saldarini, “The Gospel of Matthew and Jewish-Christian Conflict in the Galilee,” in *Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 23–38, 26–27; Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 223–225 (see also scholars mentioned by them who favor a place in the land of Israel but not necessarily Galilee: page 438, n. 20); Aaron Gale, *Redefining Ancient Borders: The Jewish Scribal Framework of Matthew's Gospel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005). For a discussion of other locations, see W. D. Davies' and Dale C. Allison's discussion in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:138–147. Davies and Allison suggest Antioch as a likely alternative, although acknowledging the difficulties involved.

institutional realities described in the text, which fit perfectly with what we know about Galilean Jewish society from other sources. We shall return to this below. In brief (and this will become clearer as we proceed in the discussion), while there will never be certainty in this regard, Galilee (possibly the city of Tiberias or Sepphoris), seems to me to be a more likely candidate than Antioch. The Galilean context, then, shall be used here as the body in which we shall locate the soul of the Matthean text. The time period in which the text was produced was most likely after 70 C.E., around the 80s or 90s C.E., as the majority of Matthean scholars have argued.⁴

What “church”?

In order to define more closely what this context means for our reading of the Gospel, it is important to say a few words regarding the social and institutional world in which the text, as a Galilean text, came into being. We shall focus on the most important institution, next to the temple, mentioned in the text: the synagogue.

When we speak of a synagogue today, we refer to a religious institution and the building in which Jews come together for religious services. In first-century Galilee (and Judea) things were quite different. The situation may be summarized as follows. First, we may note that behind what we translate into English as “synagogue” in the ancient texts, papyri, and inscriptions lie hidden no less than seventeen Greek terms, five Hebrew terms, and three Latin terms. There is some overlap between these terms, but the terminological diversity is clear enough. The most common of the terms were the Greek terms *proseuchē* and *synagogē*. *Ekklēsia* was another such synagogue term, a fact that has implications

4. For a good overview of suggested dates and arguments, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:127–138.

not only for our reading of Matthew, but also for our understanding more generally of the New Testament texts.⁵

Second, and more importantly, these terms were used interchangeably for two types of institutions. The first such type was a kind of municipal institution, or village assembly, in which people came together to make decisions regarding local affairs. Also, since religion was not thought of as separate from other spheres of society, including politics, Torah was read publicly and discussed on Sabbaths. It is important to note the public nature of this institution: no specific Jewish group, like the Pharisees, was in charge of public synagogues. Public synagogues were open to all (women and children included), and various people could read, give sermons, and debate as they wished. Some groups used the public synagogues as a platform for proclaiming their own version of Judaism. Jesus and his followers did this according to all four of the canonical Gospels.⁶

The other type of institution that was designated by the same synagogue terms was a voluntary association type of institution, very similar to other such voluntary associations, in the Graeco-Roman world (Latin, *collegia*). Jewish association synagogues, as we may call them, were

institutions created by Jews who belonged to specific groups, such as the Essenes and the Pharisees. These institutions were not public; they were for members only. We may note that Philo calls the Essenes' association a *synagogē*,⁷ and we hear of a "synagogue of the Freedmen" in Acts 6:9. Also, from Jerusalem, we have the first-century synagogue mentioned in the Theodotos inscription.⁸

In other words, while all Jews came together in public synagogues to make local decisions and read Torah on the Sabbath, some groups of Jews also had their own association synagogues in which they interpreted Jewish life according to their convictions. While Jesus never belonged to an association synagogue as far as we know and never created a new formal association himself (he preached mostly in public), his followers did so after his death. We see this clearly in Matthew. Several scholars have pointed to chapter 18 specifically, where we find Jesus giving rules for the disciples' community, the *ekklēsia*. While I do not think it accurate to regard this chapter, or Matthew as a whole, as a community rule—it is simply the wrong genre—it is obvious that Matthew 18 does reflect such concerns. We shall return to this below.

What I want to stress here is that Matthew's use of *ekklēsia* (16:18; 18:17⁹) cannot be referred to in order to claim that "the church" has now come into being, as

5. For comprehensive coverage of all available source material on ancient synagogues up to 200 C.E., in original languages and English translation, see Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue From its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity Series 72; Leiden: Brill, 2008; paperback edition by Brill, 2010), here abbreviated as *ASSB*. See especially the index on synagogue terms, p. 328.

6. Note especially John 18:20: "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret."

7. *ASSB*, No. 40. Interestingly, Philo says that these buildings were understood as sacred.

8. *ASSB*, No. 26.

9. Matt 16:18: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *ekklēsia*, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Matt 18:17: "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the *ekklēsia*; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the *ekklēsia*, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

if “the church” were something other than a synagogue. *Ekklesia* was one of many synagogue terms in the first century, but our English word “church” presupposes that the institution it designates is something other than a synagogue. “Church” is a term, therefore, that should be avoided altogether in a first-century context, since it misleads us to interpret the texts anachronistically as something removed from a Jewish context.¹⁰

In summary, our conclusions so far on the way to the theory that what we see in Matthew’s community is very much related to Pharisees and Pharisaism are as follows:

1. In addition to *public synagogues*, first-century Jewish society also included the institutions of specific associations. We call them *association synagogues* to distinguish them from the public institutions, which were designated by the same synagogue terms.
2. While the public synagogues had their own leadership structures, were open to all Jews, and were not controlled by any specific group, like the Pharisees, the association synagogues were independent of each other, had their own leadership and their own rules, and nurtured their own interpretive traditions.
3. Just as Klinghardt, Weinfeld, and others have noted that the Qumran community and its community rule belongs within the same “category”

10. Many other such terms are currently under debate. See, e.g., Paula Fredriksen, “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time has Come to Go,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 35:2 (2006): 231–246.

as Graeco-Roman associations,¹¹ we may speak of Essene association synagogues, Pharisaic association synagogues—and the association synagogue of the Mattheans. These association synagogues were all different expressions of first-century Jewish identities.

It is within such an institutional context, reconstructed on the basis of extra-Matthean evidence, as well as on matching elements in Matthew’s text, that we shall begin looking for answers regarding Matthean-Pharisaic relations.

Ritual realities in Matthew’s world

We now proceed to the world as described in the text, in order to see whether it reflects what we know about the Jewish Galilean world. We do so focusing on what was most important for ancient people as they related to what we today call “religion,” namely ritual. Ritual life for Jews in the first century was primarily related to the temple, the public synagogues, the association synagogues, and the home. If we search Matthew’s Gospel we will find a) that the text accepts most of the ritual practices central to Jewish identity, and b) that it adds nothing that we would be able

11. Matthias Klinghardt, “The Manual of Discipline in Light of Statutes of Hellenic Associations” in Norman Golb and Michael Wise, eds., *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 251–267; Moshe Weinfeld, *The Organizational Pattern and the Penal Code of the Qumran Sect: A Comparison with Guilds and Religious Associations of the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (NTOA 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

to term “non-Jewish” or “un-Jewish.” The following summary of rituals in Matthew is instructive:

1. Prayer (6:5–7)
2. Almsgiving (6:3–4)
3. Fasting (6:17–18)
4. The Jewish law/the commandments (5:17–19; 19:17),
 - a. Dietary laws (15:1–20),
 - b. Other purity laws (8:4, 5–13; 23:25–26),
 - c. The Sabbath (12:1–14, 28; 24:20),
 - d. Festivals, specifically Passover (26:2, 17–35),
 - e. Tithing (23:23),
 - f. The temple cult and practices connected with the temple, including the temple tax (5:23–24; 12:3–5; 17:24–27; 23:19–21),
 - g. and, most likely, circumcision.
5. Public ritual reading of Torah in synagogue settings.

To this should be added that those upholding the rituals described and promoted in the text also partook in sacred meals (the Eucharist), and they required baptism of people who wanted to join their association. Both of these traditions go back to the historical Jesus in some form and fit firmly within a Jewish ritual world.

Judging from the ritual culture of the text, then, I find it very difficult to extract from this a non-Jewish setting in which the text would have come into being. On the contrary, instructions in the text as well as descriptions of daily routine, metaphors, and rhetorical points, etc., build on ritual patterns shared by Jews and foreign to non-Jews. The logic and rhetoric of the text depends to no small degree on a basic ritual worldview shared with other Jews. To this we may add repeated and generalized anti-Gentile comments (e.g., 5:57; 6:7;

18:17).¹² Note also how Gentiles are said to acknowledge and submit to a Jewish king in the story of the magi. There is a global centripetal force around Jesus, which functions to attract non-Jews to his person. In addition to the example of the magi, we may also think of the stories about the Canaanite woman (15:21–28) and the centurion (8:5–13). None of these non-Jewish individuals reject the Jewishness of the Messiah. On the contrary, Jesus’ Jewish identity is an important part of the attitude of these characters as they approach him. What they ask for is to have a share of the blessings now bestowed on the Jewish people as their Messiah has arrived; they ask for whatever crumbs that may fall from their master’s table.

Considering these facts, many of which are foreign to our modern ears, it seems to me to be very difficult to argue that we are here dealing with an author or redactor beyond Judaism, someone

12. In these passages, non-Jews are described as examples of behavior that must be avoided by Mattheans: Gentiles do not love their enemies, they pray in flawed ways, and the Matthean who sins and does not repent should be looked upon as a non-Jew, i.e., someone with a low moral or religious standing, and therefore be excluded from the community of Mattheans. I am grateful to Serge Ruzer for pointing out that later non-Jewish Christians like Tertullian also despised “Gentiles,” although not being Jewish themselves. For Tertullian, Christians were a “third race,” neither Jews nor Gentiles. Such a distinction, however, was a later development in the non-Jewish Christian world. Matthew’s Gospel reveals only one major distinction between religio-ethnic identities, and that is between Jews and non-Jews. The same is true also for Paul, who speaks only about Jews and non-Jews, and never mentions the term “Christian” or suggests that Christ-believers would be something in between Jews or Gentiles. For Paul, those who are “in-Christ” are either Jews or Gentiles.

who would not be interested in belonging to Judaism but would want to distance himself from Judaism. If this would have been an aim of the author's agenda, there must surely have been better ways to delegitimize Judaism as such than to accept Jewish ritual culture and belittle non-Jews and their moral and religious stature.

However, having said this, there are still tensions in the text, severe tensions. These tensions and the aggressive rhetoric must be explained without referring to the word "Judaism," as if "Judaism" or "the synagogue" would be targeted by people not belonging within these religious-cultural and institutional frames. Let us attempt to address the problem from this perspective and see if such a procedure can make sense of the material at hand, the Gospel of Matthew as a whole.

The myth of a "Jewish majority": Tensions between Mattheans and other Jews

a) *Angry Mattheans*

It is a well-known fact that the Gospel of Matthew is more focused on divine judgment than any other New Testament text (although Revelation is a close competitor). The Mattheans were angry, for some reason, and they were angry with a specific group of people: the Pharisees.¹³ The Jewish people as a whole are not targeted. This is clear in several ways. Our author is specific when pronouncing judgment, pointing to Pharisees and scribes, and sometimes to the chief priests and the elders. The text

13. Statistics suggest the following regarding the presence of Pharisees in the New Testament: Matthew twenty-nine times, Mark eleven, Luke twenty-six, John nineteen, Acts seven, Paul once (Phil 3:5). These constitute a total of ninety-three explicit references to Pharisees.

also speaks about "the crowds," meaning the majority of the Jewish people (Greek, *hoi ochloi*), as opposed to the leaders, and this group receives positive, neutral, and only periodic negative treatment. From a historical perspective, "the crowds" in the narrative are thus more "real" in the sense that they are presented as having more complex and shifting attitudes. In contrast, Matthew's Pharisees are flat characters, portrayed as one-dimensional bad guys.¹⁴

Further, if we take a closer look at Matthean critique of Pharisees it seems to be lacking in substance. Indeed, rather than carefully argued cases against Pharisaic doctrine, for example, *ad hominem* attacks regarding their personal character are the most common form of verbal abuse in Matthew. Pharisees are accused of vanity, arrogance, pride, egotism (e.g., 23:5–7), greed (e.g., 23:25), and a general sense of superiority. It is understood that such generalized, unkind remarks have little to do with individual Pharisees and historical realities. More interesting is a feature of Matthean anti-Pharisaic attacks seldom noted in the literature. For Matthew, a major problem with the Pharisees is not that they are too focused on keeping the law, but, on the contrary, that they are deficient in Torah observance. Note Matt 23:16–24, esp. 23–24, in this regard and the accusation that Pharisees were associated with those who killed the prophets, which indicates lack of reverence for God and law (23:31). Indeed, Matthew wants to rid the land of those who break the law (Matt 13:41–42; cf. 5:17–20; 7:21). Thus, when the Pharisees are critiqued in terms of law, it is because *they do not do enough*; they neglect the most important aspects of

14. This portrait of the Pharisees is unique to Matthew. For more varied and less one-dimensional portraits in the New Testament, see the examples given below.

the law, such as justice, mercy, trust/faith, while focusing on lighter matters such as tithing (which the Mattheans also adhere to, but without losing sight of justice and mercy: 23:23).

We find in Matthew no disagreements with other Jewish groups in terms of the relevance of the Jewish law. Rather, most of what we see seems to be based on animosity generated from other experiences than halakhic disputes. We shall return to this below. It is obvious from the text that Jesus and the disciples share the same basic point of departure in Torah and its interpretation as other Jewish groups and that the critique against the Pharisees, the very force of the arguments used by the Matthean Jesus, depends on this shared foundation. The aversion that Mattheans feel against Pharisees is so strong, however, that they have produced the only text in the New Testament that states explicitly that the Pharisees will have no place in the Kingdom (Matt 5:20; 23:13, 15, 33, 35–36). This prompts the question: who were these Pharisees?

b) Are “Pharisees” rabbis in disguise?

It is clear that the group in the Gospel called Pharisees is a chosen target by those who redacted and produced the Gospel of Matthew. Some scholars have argued that behind the term “Pharisee” is a post-70 C.E. reference to the rabbis. This idea is connected to the assumption that the rabbis rose to power and prominence in Jewish society immediately after the fall of the temple. The Mattheans, so goes the argument, found themselves in a minority position in which they had to fight a powerful enemy who were redefining “Judaism” as “rabbinic Judaism.” By that time, the Pharisees, it is claimed, had lost the influence they had during the time of Jesus in the 30s, but since the story is

about Jesus’ time, the redactors had to use that group’s name when they attacked the rabbis.

This hypothesis is unlikely, however.¹⁵ There is a growing consensus today that the rabbis did not become dominant in Jewish society until the fourth century, possibly later.¹⁶ It is very improbable that the social situation changed radically in the decades after the fall of the temple in terms of the dominance of one group. It is much more likely that the priests continued to hold prominence in Jewish society, just as they had before. Sociologically, examples of similar situations are legion, and we have ancient evidence supporting such scenarios. Most often elites, with their experience of ruling society, adapt to new circumstances and therefore survive. Not even the rabbinic texts themselves exhibit any interest in society, or in public institutions such as synagogues, until later centuries.¹⁷

We must conclude, then, that, first, we have no evidence of a Jewish denominational majority¹⁸ during this time, and

15. So also Ronald Deines, “The Social Profile of the Pharisees,” in Reimund Bieringer et al., eds., *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 111–132, 119, n. 21.

16. This theory is based both on rabbinic literature (only the latest layers display an interest in Jewish society generally and synagogues) and on archaeological remains of Late Antique synagogues, which do not conform to rabbinic standards but rather contradict them.

17. Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), especially 121–160; 269–297.

18. The priests were not associated with any specific party or denomination; they could be Sadducees but also Pharisees, or have no such affiliation at all.

second, that those whom Matthew calls Pharisees most likely *were* Pharisees. The historical scene on which the Matthean drama is played out is thus one in which we find several Jewish groups, but even more Jews who did not belong to any specific association at all (“common Judaism”). The Pharisees were just one association among others; why, then, would Mattheans attack this specific group and not others?

c) Matthean interaction with Jewish society

If there was no specific denominational majority group in the society in which Mattheans lived, we may ask about this group’s relationship to Jewish society. This includes details that we have already mentioned, such as paying the temple tax and adhering to the national cult. Here we can be very brief: there are no signs in the Gospel itself that Mattheans rejected these central aspects of Jewish society. Tensions are focused much more on the Pharisees than on society. Even when the other Gospels point to the chief priests as the culprits, Matthew makes sure to add to the passages the name of the Pharisees to make the Pharisees look worse (e.g., Matt 21:45; 27:62; compare the same stories in Mark and Luke).

d) Sociology, conflict, synagogues

How can this situation be explained? Sociological studies (as well as physics!) teach us that real friction can only happen when groups are very close to one another. If we take the conflict between Mattheans and the Pharisees seriously and note the lack of a Jewish majority during this time period, the most convincing way, as I see it, to understand this conflict is to suggest that it occurred within a specific institutional setting, of which both Mattheans and Pharisees were a part. At this point, the reconstruction of institutional realities

becomes extremely important. We have already noted that Mattheans were not against the temple (and the Pharisees did not run the temple anyway). We have also noted that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Pharisees ruled the public synagogues either. This means that the conflict we see in the text was most likely played out in an association synagogue context, in a *Pharisaic association* in which the Mattheans were a minority, a sub-group.

Now, this may sound like a radical suggestion to modern ears, especially looking at almost 2000 years of reception of the Gospel of Matthew in the churches, but would this be strange from a first-century perspective? Some may think so, but it is often forgotten that the Pharisees are the only Jewish group that is mentioned as having members who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. We see this in Acts 15:5, and Nicodemus is another example (cf. John 3:1–2). Paul, of course, was a Pharisee, and Acts 23:6 presents him as claiming that group identity even as a Christ-believer, saying, in the present tense: “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” We may also note the great interest the Pharisees had in Jesus according to the Gospels, enough to repeatedly invite him to dinner and discussions (cf. Luke 7:39; 11:37).

Further, in Luke 13:31 a group of Pharisees tried to save Jesus’ life by warning him of Herod’s plans to kill him. We also see in Acts how Gamaliel defended Peter and “the apostles” against the council and the high priest and, in fact, saves them from being killed (Acts 5:34–39). Again, it is the Pharisees who defended Paul as trouble broke out in Jerusalem (Acts 23:9). Indeed, reading Luke we find that no less figures than Jesus, Peter, and Paul were at times protected by the Pharisees.

From Josephus we learn that the Pharisees were very upset over the killing, ordered by the high priest, of James the brother of Jesus.

Nothing of this sort is said of any other Jewish group in the New Testament. Note also, with regard to Matthew's community, how Matt 23:2–3 states that the Pharisees sit on Moses' chair and thus must be respected in terms of their authority. Such language reflects a common institutional setting in which authority is agreed upon. (It is very difficult to imagine the Qumran community to say such a thing of the Pharisees or the Sadducees for that matter!) We shall return to Matt 23:2–3 shortly.

In terms of proximity of religious convictions, Acts explicitly refers to Pharisaic belief in resurrection, angels, and spirits (Acts 23:8). Far from being a unique occurrence, it is quite likely that it was not impossible for Pharisees to accept the belief that Jesus had been resurrected. (Sociologically, this is also how it works. If people change religious outlook, it is usually to something not too far away from their previous tradition.) As such individuals became convinced by other Christ-believers, they began forming subgroups within Pharisaic associations, without giving up their Pharisaic identity. Rather, their Pharisaic identity was *confirmed*, not abandoned, in the claim that Jesus was resurrected. However, as we mentioned earlier, Matthew's Gospel shows clear indications of the formation of an independent association, especially in chapter 18. How does this fit into the picture?

e) Building a Matthean community

It is my contention that the people who wrote down the originally oral traditions

using Mark¹⁹ were a breakaway group from a Pharisaic association, in which they previously had formed a subgroup. Such a scenario explains the tensions within the Gospel text and why doctrinal sections, like 23:2–3, were placed in the same context as the verbal attacks that follow in that same chapter. The separatists, as we may call them, referred in this passage to a tradi-

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tion that they shared with other Pharisees, including Christ-believing Pharisees, that the Pharisees formed a legitimate group in

19. I have not been convinced of the existence of a Q-source independent of the Matthean community. It is more likely, as I see it, that these traditions were transmitted within the Matthean community and were then used by Luke, who probably knew about Matthew's text. Luke could also have had access to common oral tradition independently that Matthew's community also transmitted before they produced their text. This may explain the minor variations between the two Gospels regarding these and other traditions.

charge of transmitting the law of Moses. Then, by delegitimizing these leaders through references to character flaws, etc., the separatists aimed at convincing everyone to follow them as they began to cut themselves loose and form their own independent association.

The question is, of course, why they would break away at this specific point in time, namely, the late 80s. The most likely reason, as I see it, would be an increased eschatological awareness following as a direct result of primarily two developments within the group: a) the fall of the temple, which most likely was predicted by the historical Jesus, and b) the increasing presence of non-Jews in the larger apostolic-Jewish movement, which was interpreted as an eschatological sign (cf., the earlier view expressed in Matt 10:5–6).

In addition to these factors within the group, it is also likely that there were factors external to the group affecting the situation. The larger Pharisaic movement had begun to undergo changes, which would eventually result in a coalition with other Jewish groups and individuals forming what became Rabbinic Judaism as we know it in late Antiquity. These developments were in opposition to messianic Matthean Pharisees, downplaying eschatology in a politically very sensitive period in Post-War Galilee.

I have mentioned Matt 18 several times. This passage especially indicates clearly that an independent association was being formed. However, it would be incorrect to assume, as some scholars have, that Matthew's Gospel would represent the community rule of this association. It is simply the wrong genre. We may compare it with the community rule at Qumran, or the rule of the Iobaccoi, or other association rules to realize that the narrative form was not used for such

purposes. It is much more likely that what we see happening in Matthew is a *legitimization of a community rule*, not the community rule itself. Specific rules of the community receive legitimization from Jesus himself in the Matthew narrative, as he instructs his disciples. In other words, based on this mirror-reflection of an association in Matthew, and on what we know about the structure and rules of other Jewish and non-Jewish associations, we may theorize that there existed, in this Matthean community, another document, a community rule. This community rule would have governed the ritual and social life of the Mattheans, and the Gospel text would have been read on a regular basis in order to influence and inspire members to become more and more like "ideal" members, based on Jesus' example and instruction.

At this point in our discussion, I might be expected to say that, unfortunately, this document, this community rule, has been lost. However, I believe that would be a mistake. As it happens, there is one document that displays, in some detail, characteristics that fit perfectly with the Gospel of Matthew in the setting I have just described: the *Didache*. This document dates, in its redacted form, to about the same time as Matthew's Gospel and may be placed geographically and culturally in the same region.²⁰ I shall not go into detail

20. Recent studies on the *Didache* in relation to the Gospel of Matthew include, Alan J. P. Garrow, *The Gospel of Matthew's Dependence on the Didache* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Huub van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2002); Huub van de Sandt and Jürgen K. Zangenberg, *Matthew, James and the Didache: Three Related Documents in Their Jewish and Christian Settings* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

here,²¹ but only note the strength of this hypothesis: it is supported by text-external historical and institutional evidence as well as by close comparisons between the two texts that reveal remarkable similarities with regard to theological and ritual worldview as well as social setting. In sum, I propose that the community history we see develop here had its roots in a Pharisaic association. It reflects the production of two texts, both of which are careful to preserve their memories of their previous history and at the same time to claim their independence by de-legitimizing their former association-siblings.

Concluding remarks: Beyond the “Was-the- author-Jewish-or-not” discussion

While a minority of scholars would understand the author of the Gospel of Matthew to have been a non-Jew (especially from Clarke’s article of 1947 and onward),²² the

21. I will present a full discussion of this matter in a forthcoming monograph, tentatively entitled: *The Gospel of Matthew and the Myth of Christian Origins: Rethinking the So-called Parting of the Ways Between Judaism and Christianity*.

22. Kenneth W. Clark, “The Gentile Bias in Matthew,” *JBL* 66 no. 2 (1947): 165–172. Other scholars arguing similar cases include Paol Nepper-Christensen, *Das Matthäusevangelium: Ein Judenchristliches Evangelium?* (University of Aarhus (Acta theologica Danica 1; Aarhus University Press, 1958); Wolfgang Trilling, *Das Wahre Israel: Studien zur Theologie des Matthäusevangeliums* (Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 10; Munich: Kösel, 1964); John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel*

majority of Matthean scholars today would argue that the community that produced the text was indeed Jewish. These latter scholars would then differ among themselves regarding whether the Mattheans were still within “the synagogue” or whether they had left “the synagogue.” My discussion here aims at problematizing such use of “the synagogue” to argue an *intra-* or *extra-muros* position. Recent synagogue research suggests rather that we are dealing with Jewish association synagogues here, and that we cannot speak of Mattheans “leaving the synagogue.”

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Matthean Jews would have rejected participation in public synagogues. On the contrary, all indications point to the opposite conclusion, including the ambivalent position of the “crowds” in the narrative. Matthew’s community was, in fact, much closer to Jewish society than, for example, the Qumran community was, since the latter withdrew both from temple and public synagogues.

As Alan Segal pointed out in the 1990s, it does not say much if we identify a text as Jewish in a period in which Judaism was very diverse.²³ “Which Judaism?” is a more interesting and pressing issue to deal with. This is the question I have focused on here with regard to one specific apostolic-Jewish community: the radical Pharisaic Christ-believers behind the Gospel of Matthew.

(New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

23. Alan F. Segal, “Matthew’s Jewish Voice,” in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, David L. Balch, ed. ((Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 3–37, especially 15.

From Villain to Tragic Figure: The Characterization of Judas in Matthew

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As a literary character in Matthew's theological narrative, Judas is an intriguing figure. On the one hand, he has one essential role in the plot, which is to hand over Jesus to the religious authorities. Thus, Matthew's narrative compels the reader to view and evaluate Judas in relationship to this handing-over role. On the other hand, Judas does not remain a flat, one-dimensional character. Surprisingly, he undergoes a reversal after he has fulfilled his role. This unexpected reversal moves a villainous Judas to the threshold of redemption. Yet Judas' reversal ends tragically as he fails to find the redemption he seeks. In what follows, we will trace the characterization of Judas in Matthew as he moves from villain to tragic figure.

The characterization of Judas does not begin at 26:14–16 where Judas speaks and acts in his own right for the first time. Rather, the reader begins to build Judas' character when he is first introduced in the list of the twelve apostles in 10:2–4.¹ Here Judas receives two epithets, which provide

the impetus for his characterization. Judas is marked as “one of the twelve” (cf. 10:2; 26:14, 47) and as “the one who handed him over” (cf. 10:4; 26:25, 46; 27:3).² Being identified as one of the twelve means Judas shares a particular relationship with Jesus. The reader is to regard him as one called by Jesus and authorized for the mission of the kingdom (10:1–7).

2. This and subsequent translations will be the author's own. Almost every English translation of 10:4 reads “who betrayed him.” This is a very unfortunate translation for a number of reasons. First, the Greek word used here, *paradidōmi*, does not carry the notion of “betray” as much as “hand over or turn over.” See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (*BDAG*), 762. Second, the use of “betray” conceals how *paradidōmi* is used regularly by Matthew to depict the united, parallel handing over actions of Judas (26:15–16, 21–25, 45–48; 27:3–4), the religious leaders (20:19; 27:2, 18), and Pilate (27:26) as well as the fact that John the Baptist had been handed over (4:12). Third, this obscures connections to Jesus' warnings that his disciples will also be handed over (10:17–21; 24:9–10) thus linking the destiny of disciples with their Lord's destiny. Fourth, this also erases the word's connections to Isa 53 wherein the suffering servant is handed over by the Lord for the sins of the people (Isa 53:6, 12).

1. On the importance of a sequential development of characters in a narrative see John Darr, *On Character Building. The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 29–31, 42–44. For other aspects of character development see Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 51–67.

Henceforth, the reader is to assume that Judas is present when “the disciples” or “the twelve” appear in the story. Thus, Judas is privy to Jesus’ teachings given not to the general populace but intended for the private audience of disciples (e.g., 13:10–52). When the disciples worship Jesus as God’s Son (14:22–33) or when Simon Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son (16:13–20), Judas is present. Thus, he is to be viewed as part of the protagonist’s inner circle.

The other epithet given to Judas, “the one who handed him over” (10:4), immediately catches the reader’s attention and raises ominous questions about Judas’ future. Just what his handing over action means or entails is unclear at this point of the story, but the reader does recall that John the Baptist had been handed over prior to Jesus’ public ministry (4:12). The fact that the participle describing Judas’ handing over activity is in the aorist (past) tense in 10:4 would seem to indicate that this is a sure thing. Hence the reader is being alerted to Judas’ act as a matter of foreshadowing, long before it takes place in the plot.

Beginning in 16:21, Jesus issues a series of passion prophecies which propel the story toward its climax and also add a sense of foreboding regarding Judas. In 16:21 (and by implication in 17:9–12), the religious leaders in Jerusalem are prophesied as the ones who will cause Jesus to suffer leading up to him being killed. In 17:22–23, Jesus prophesies that he will be handed over into the hands of people who will kill him. In 20:18–19, he prophesies that he will be handed over to the religious leaders who will condemn him to death and then hand him over to the Gentiles who will ridicule, whip, and crucify him. Because it was made known in 10:4 that Judas handed over Jesus, the reader is able to make inferences that Judas will somehow

be linked to these other prophesied actions involving Jesus being handed over to the religious authorities who will then hand him over to the Gentiles for crucifixion.

In this way, a growing portrait of Judas is being developed in which he is potentially an evil, treacherous character. He is potentially treacherous in that he is a chosen member of Jesus’ inner circle who has been informed about Jesus’ true identity as God’s Son (14:33; 16:16–17) as well as Jesus’ impending passion and its salvific effects as atoning sacrifice (20:28), and yet he is the one who handed over Jesus. He is potentially evil in that Jesus will be handed over to his malicious enemies, the religious leaders, who will condemn him and hand him over to the Gentiles who will cause him to suffer and then crucify him. Such inferences are not idle speculations by the reader. Rather, prior to Jesus’ passion they are the result of clear linguistic and narrative connections, which the narrator provides to the alert reader in order to understand better the characterization of Judas as one of the twelve who handed over Jesus. Unless alternatives are provided within the story itself, the conclusion that Judas is a villain lurking within Jesus’ inner circle grows stronger and stronger. At the same time, this also raises a question about Jesus’ own foreknowledge. Does Jesus know that Judas will hand him over? Jesus clearly knows that he will be handed over to the religious leaders who will hand him over to the Gentiles. He also knows he will be crucified and raised on the third day in accord with God’s salvific plan. Yet does he know that one of the twelve—one of his followers to whom he has promised an eschatological throne (19:26)—will hand him over? Is Judas not mentioned in Jesus’ passion prophecies because Jesus is unaware of Judas’ impending actions? The knowledge given to the reader that Judas handed over Jesus (10:4) and that

Jesus will be handed over to the religious leaders thus builds suspense and anticipation as the time of Jesus' death grows ever closer in the narrative.

Judas' infamy comes explicitly to the forefront beginning in 26:14–16.

Judas freely goes to Jesus' mortal enemies and negotiates a price for the specific purpose of handing Jesus over to them.

In this scene, Judas freely goes to Jesus' mortal enemies and negotiates a price for the specific purpose of handing Jesus over to them. The narrator has included subtle details within the narrative, which expressly link Judas with the religious leaders and so intensify his characterization as villain. First, as one of the twelve (of which the reader is reminded in 26:14a) he should be with Jesus but instead goes to those who are plotting to arrest Jesus by deceitful means in order to kill him (26:3–5). Up to this point in the story, no disciple has gone to these antagonists. In fact, Jesus has twice warned his disciples to stay away from them because they only lead others to eschatological ruin (15:14; 23:13–15). Second, the phrasing of Judas' name in 26:14 (“the one called Judas”) directly parallels the phrasing of Caiaphas' name in 26:3 (“the one called Caiaphas”)

thus making them co-conspirators in the plot against Jesus.³ Third, Judas seeks and receives money from those who have made God's house into a bandits' hideout (21:12–16). Having received his wages up front, he is now in their employ and immediately seeks an opportune time to accomplish his nefarious mission.⁴ Fourth, Judas is presented in stark contrast to the unnamed woman of the previous scene (26:6–13). She came to Jesus carrying out the extravagant act of pouring costly perfume on Jesus to prepare him for burial. Her timely action is that good work which henceforth will be spoken favorably in her memory (26:13). Judas, however, perpetrates an evil work in service of Jesus' opponents who are intent on sending him to his grave. Hence, he will always be remembered as the one who handed him over as 10:4 denoted. Fifth, as Judas is busying himself searching for the opportune time to do the will of the religious leaders (26:16), disciples are diligently preparing for the Passover in accordance with Jesus' will (26:17–19). Sixth, the fact that he is using his status as disciple to aid and abet Jesus' enemies shows that he has also adopted their devious methods (16:1; 19:3; 22:15, 23, 34–35; 26:4) so that he has become the proverbial ravenous wolf in sheep's clothing (7:15) who produces evil fruit. Thus while remaining one of the twelve (26:20), Judas has voluntarily linked himself to Jesus' antagonists. Ulti-

3. John Paul Heil, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus. A Narrative-Critical Reading of Matthew 26–28* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 28.

4. The significance of the thirty pieces of silver lies not in its monetary value (which is not very great) but in its theological value as an echo of Zech 11:12 wherein the amount paid by the wicked sheep merchants to the shepherd-prophet is thirty pieces of silver.

mately, such a bifurcated position will be impossible to maintain since one is either with or against Jesus (12:30). A disciple is called to follow Jesus on the narrow way leading to life (7:13–14), but one led by the religious authorities is on a path leading to ruin (15:14; 23:13–15).

As previously noted, the narrative had not made clear whether or not Jesus is aware of Judas' treachery. This ambiguity creates additional suspense for the reader in that Jesus has announced the impending critical time of his being handed over (26:2, 18) while the reader has also been told that Judas is seeking an opportune time to hand over Jesus to the religious authorities. This suspense comes to a head during the Passover meal when Jesus announces to the twelve that one of them will hand him over (26:21). The disciples react by posing a question to Jesus which anticipates that he will exonerate them of such infamy as they each ask, "Surely not I, Lord?" (26:22). A few verses later (26:25) Judas himself asks almost the exact same question with damning exceptions: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" His question reveals some crucial aspects of his character. On the one hand, he knows well that it is he since he initiated the scheme to hand Jesus over to the religious leaders, and he has been seeking an opportune time to do just that (26:14–16). On the other hand, the fact that he addresses Jesus as "rabbi" rather than "lord" shows that he does not view Jesus as do the other disciples. Judas is moving away from a lord-disciple mindset and is adopting the perspective of the religious leaders wherein "rabbi" functions as an appropriate title for teachers; a title Jesus had instructed his disciples not to use (23:8).

Jesus' own reply to Judas, "You yourself said it" (26:25), accomplishes two points. First, it confirms the fact that Jesus fully knows Judas' role in this conspiracy.

As in all other aspects of his passion, Jesus remains fully aware of what is transpiring and goes forth in obedience to God's plan as written in Scripture (26:24). Thus Jesus has exposed Judas' undercover operation. Second, Jesus' response puts Judas' question right back into Judas' mouth as self-indictment. Judas' evil heart shows itself in his false testimony and plotting which will lead to murder (15:19).

The woe pronounced by Jesus in 26:24 points out to the reader the dire consequences Judas now faces because he is handing Jesus over. While this woe recalls the sharp woe spoken to the world in 18:7 and the excruciating set of woes pronounced against Pharisees and scribes in 23:13–36, in some ways this woe against Judas is more foreboding. As one of the twelve, Judas had been promised an eschatological throne and inheritance of eternal life (19:28–29). Now, however, he is told that it would have been better had he never been born. Nevertheless, in Matthew's characterization, Judas was neither born nor fated by Scripture to fulfill this role. As Judas demonstrates through his own words and actions, he has chosen to play this role. He has adopted the goals, means, and perspectives of those who seek Jesus' death. His move to betray the intimate fellowship existing between the Lord and his disciples is geared to move the reader to repudiation rather than pity.

A narrative gap appears in the events between 26:25 and 26:45. In 26:20–25 Judas is clearly with Jesus and the other disciples, but in 26:45–47 it is clear that Judas has somehow separated from them and now is with an armed throng coming against Jesus. It is never explicitly stated when Judas left to join up with Jesus' arresters. Within the narrative itself, however, there are clues, which help the reader fill in this gap even as they continue to influence the characterization of Judas.

Because there are no scene shifts to indicate or allow Judas' departure between 26:25 and 26:26–29, the reader is expected to assume that Judas was a participant in the sacred covenant meal depicted in 26:26–29 (reinforced by the parallel openings, “while they were eating,” in 26:21 and 26:26). Thus Judas heard Jesus interpret the cup and his blood as an atoning sacrifice poured out for the forgiveness of sins (26:28) just as he had heard Jesus speak of his mission to give his life as ransom for many (20:28). Judas has even received the bread and cup that Jesus offers his disciples. Judas, then, does not lack theological information about what God is accomplishing in Jesus' death.

After the scene switches to the Mount of Olives (26:30), it is specifically noted that all the disciples (26:35b) pledge their loyalty to Jesus in response to his prophecies that they all will be scandalized because of him and that Peter would deny him (26:31–35a). Thus, it is assumed that Judas remains present and continues to be a deceptive character as his pledge of loyalty is part of his ongoing cozenage. It would seem, then, that Judas leaves the disciples somewhere between their arrival at Gethsemane in 26:36a and his arrival with the minions of the religious leaders in 26:45–48. The implicit assumption is that while Jesus is off praying, having taken along Peter and Zebedee's sons (26:36b), Judas slips away to lead the potentially violent crowd to arrest Jesus. Hence while Jesus diligently and fervently commits himself to the will of God (26:38–44), Judas commits himself to the will of the religious leaders to whom he will hand over Jesus.

In the scene of Jesus' arrest (26:45–56) Judas continues to be characterized as villain. Twice he is described as the one who is handing Jesus over (26:46, 48). He has now fully linked himself with Jesus'

armed opponents (26:47). Judas gives a sign to this crowd showing he shares the mindset of the religious leaders whom Jesus condemns for seeking signs (12:38–40; 16:1–4). His actions and words toward Jesus are disguised as marks of friendship, including using the intimacy of a kiss as a signal for arrest (26:48–50). Once again, he addresses Jesus with the rejected title, “rabbi,” (26:50). Thus feigning friendship, Judas continues to act as friend so that his actions are that of treachery not tragedy.

Upon handing over Jesus, Judas disappears from the scene (26:50). This should not be surprising since he has fulfilled his role as the one who handed over Jesus. Now the story can progress to present the fulfillment of Jesus' other passion prophecies. In essence, then, Judas is no longer necessary to the progression of the narrative's plot. This is the story about Jesus not Judas. Even if Judas should reappear, the reader would naturally continue to regard him as a villainous character who thinks, speaks, and acts as a fiendish, deceptive character. When he is actually reintroduced in 27:3a, he is only described as “the one who was handing him over” but is no longer also depicted as “one of the twelve” (as in 10:1–4; 26:14–16, 47–48). This would seem to indicate that he is now fully gone to the dark side of the religious leaders who had just handed over Jesus to Pilate (27:2) as like characters act in like ways. But then comes the shocking, quite unexpected turn wherein Judas reverses himself, returns the money to the religious authorities, and confesses his sin of handing over innocent blood (27:3b). Such abrupt and uncharacteristic behavior on Judas' part forces the reader to look carefully at what he is doing and why he suddenly acts this way.

The word depicting Judas' reversal in 27:3b (*metamelomai*) could be translated “have regrets; be sorry; change one's

mind.”⁵ All three translations are quite possible in this context. What is most significant about Judas’ reversal in this context, however, is that he is now returning the thirty pieces of silver and confessing his sin. Within the literary and theological context of Matthew’s entire Gospel, this reversal puts Judas on the threshold of forgiveness, salvation, and redemption. Matthew’s literary and theological world is full of such reversals. Here the last are first and the first are last (19:30; 20:16); revelations are given to infants while the wise are blinded (11:25–26; 13:11–17); outsiders such as sinners, the maimed, the lame, the blind and the deaf have their courses mercifully reversed (9:9–34; 11:2–6); a Canaanite woman becomes a model of faith (15:21–28); the huge debt of ten thousand talents is mercifully forgiven (18:23–35); a sinful brother or sister is to be forgiven not seven times but seventy-seven times (18:21–22); and a member of the twelve who had just denied Jesus still has the possibility of restoration (26:69–75; cf. 26:31–35; 28:9–10, 16–20) even though Jesus had previously said that whoever denies him before people, he will deny before God (10:32–33). These same possibilities are now at hand for Judas. His reversal puts him on the verge of forgiveness and restoration so that he again would be one of the twelve.

Yet it is precisely at this crucial point that Judas makes his tragic mistake. On the

5. *BDAG*, 639. This same word had been used in Matt 21:29, 32 to depict the change of mind by a son in a parable who initially refused to do his father’s bidding but then reverses himself and does it, and the reversal of tax collectors and prostitutes who respond quite positively to John’s call for repentance. Also note its use in Zech 11:5 LXX to describe the malicious buyers of the doomed flock who have not reversed themselves but have grown rich at the expense of that flock.

threshold of forgiveness, Judas turns to the exact wrong source for such forgiveness. Instead of seeking God’s salvation and forgiveness which comes through Jesus (1:21; 9:2–8; 20:28; 26:28), he turns to the religious leaders whose mediating role within God’s salvific design has been revoked because of their own unfruitful, evil actions (21:21–22:10). Judas’ confession, “I have sinned in handing over innocent blood” (27:4), is both sincere and tragically ironic. Judas sincerely acknowledges both his own guilt and Jesus’ innocence as he

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returns his ill-gotten gains. Yet this is tragic irony because he has failed to perceive that Jesus’ innocent blood is also the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (26:28). Indeed, the previous evening Judas had heard Jesus declare this and had participated in the sacred, covenantal meal with Jesus. Yet now he shows that he has failed to understand the reality of such forgiveness offered in and through Jesus. Thus, his reversal is for naught. Unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes whose reversal included believing John’s message (21:32) and unlike

Peter whose remorse included remembering Jesus' word (26:75), Judas fails to remember or to believe in the one who brings true forgiveness. On the verge of redemption, he fatefully goes in the wrong direction by seeking forgiveness from the wrong source. Even the religious leaders inadvertently admit as much to Judas when they tell him, "What concern is that to us? Take care of it yourself" (27:4b).⁶ Though given the role of absolving Israel of bloodguilt (Deut21:1–9; 19:8–13), the religious leaders are no longer able to fulfill such a role because of their own bloodguilt (21:33–45; 23:29–36).

This leaves Judas in a hopeless situation. He has been left to mediate his own sins by those to whom he had wrongly turned for such mediation. Judas, however, cannot take care of his own sin. The only one who has such authority is the one he handed over (1:23; 9:2–8; 26:28). Because Judas is blind to this reality, the only thing he can take care of is his own suicide. In this way, Judas actually enacts the woe Jesus had spoken about him. In light of this tragic, ignoble death by hanging himself, it would have been better that Judas had not been born (26:24).⁷ Still,

it is important to note that Judas was not fated to fulfill this woe. Rather, his death results from his failure to regard Jesus as more than an innocent victim of his own treachery. Jesus, not the religious leaders, atones for sins, but Judas never understands this essential, salvific reality. In the end, there is no redemption for Judas. The blood that atones for sins still convicts Judas. In Matthew's world, he is forever to be known as the one who handed over Jesus (10:4) rather than as one of the twelve. This final reality is confirmed in 28:16 when the number of disciples restored to fellowship with the risen Jesus stands at eleven.

Judas, then, is a tragic character not because he handed over Jesus. That was a villainous act from which he reversed himself. His tragedy lies in the fact that his reversal fails to lead to the reality of true forgiveness. He can only see Jesus as innocent victim instead of God's Son whose death saves his people from their sins. Because Judas has linked himself to the religious leaders both in terms of his treachery and confession, he is no longer a member of Jesus' people. As such a tragic character, Judas draws both fear and pity from Matthew's perceptive reader. He inspires fear because he confirms the truth of Jesus' warnings that these religious leaders are blind guides who will lead others to eschatological ruin (15:14; 23:13–15), and he awakens pity in that while Judas could see his own sin in handing over innocent blood, he totally failed to see how God was offering forgiveness through that same blood poured out for many. Though no longer a villain, Judas ends as a tragic character in Matthew's story.

6. David Garland, *Reading Matthew. A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 254. In a similar manner, when these same religious leaders treat the returned thirty pieces of silver as "blood money" which would defile the temple treasury they inadvertently acknowledge Jesus' innocence and their own guilt.

7. The depiction of Judas going out and hanging himself in 27:5 is a direct echo of 2 Sam 17:23 where Ahithophel went out and hanged himself when he realized that Absalom would not follow his sound advice. This echo also intensifies the pity felt toward Judas. Whereas Ahithophel first put his

house in order and subsequently was buried in his father's tomb, Judas puts nothing in order and his burial place is unknown, perhaps even in the field of blood purchased with his blood money (27:6–10).

Matthew: The Musical

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Hearing Matthew's Gospel through the lections of Year A in the common lectionary is rather like seeing the film version of a favorite novel. First, the previews run. During the Advent and Christmas seasons, particularly dramatic parts of Matthew's story are played out of sequence: the voice in the wilderness on the second Sunday of Advent (3:1–12), the imprisonment of John the Baptist on the third Sunday of Advent (11:2–11), Jesus' conception on the fourth Sunday of Advent (1:18–25), the flight into Egypt and Herod's slaughter of the infants on the first Sunday after Christmas (2:13–23), Matthew's judgment scene on New Year's Day (25:31–36).

Beginning with Epiphany, the feature film begins. The Epiphany story (2:1–12) is Matthew's signature moment in the lectionary, since it occurs in all three lectionary cycles and has become an annual benchmark in Christian worship. After the Epiphany, lections in Year A conform more closely to Matthew's chronological order, with some notable exceptions. Jesus' baptism (3:13–17) follows on the Sunday after Epiphany. We hear portions of the Sermon on the Mount (5–7) in the Sundays after the Epiphany, then jump forward to chapter 17 on Transfiguration Sunday. The lectionary rearranges Matthew's chronology again on Ash Wednesday with teachings about prayer and fasting from the Sermon on the Mount (6:1–6, 16–21), then turns to the temptation of Jesus (4:1–11) on the first Sunday of Lent, the transfiguration (17:1–9) on the second

Sunday of Lent, Jesus' entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (21:1–11), and parts of Matthew's passion and resurrection narratives during Holy Week and Easter. The conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, the great commission (28:16–20), occurs on Trinity Sunday. Then, in the season after Pentecost, Year A's lections turn back the clock and narrate events from Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry more or less in order, beginning with the call of Matthew (9:9–13, 18–26).

The lections from Year A, our "film version" of Matthew's Gospel, tell a now-familiar story, even a compelling story. But much is missing. A different story emerges with pieces missing and out of order. The visit of the Magi, extracted from its context in the opening scenes of Matthew's Gospel, shines like a charming little jewel in the Christian liturgical year, with exotic characters, fragrant and colorful gifts, and intrigue with a happy ending as the astrologers escape Herod's murderous rage. As the Gospel story continues, it focuses on Jesus' instruction of his disciples that culminates in the great commission (28:16–20), with its trinitarian baptismal formula and its injunction to make disciples of all nations.

In preaching and in the version of Matthew's Gospel that churchgoers carry around in their heads, Matthew's story often becomes a guidebook for Christian piety. Modern believers take the disciples' place as recipients of Jesus' teaching, and Jesus' death and resurrection become a

Christian model for endurance of a hard life on earth that is bearable because the faithful receive a heavenly reward. Thus Matthew's judgment scene (25:31–46) becomes an individual Christian's final judgment after death.

The lectionary's "film version" of Matthew's Gospel leaves readers with serious problems. The lectionary omits the early controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees¹ found in Matthew's Gospel in chapters 9, 12 and 15, as well as Matthew's woes to the Pharisees in chapter 23. But the lectionary for Year A preserves enough of the controversy in chapters 21–22 to invite modern listeners at worship to identify the "hypocrites" of the Sermon on the Mount (6:1, 5, 16) as Pharisees, to see them as rejected by God for being unrighteous (5:20) and for plotting against Jesus (22:15, 34), and to understand them to be replaced as the chosen people of God at the great commission (28:18–20).

The common lectionary's abbreviated "film version" of the Gospel also obscures the fact that Matthew's message actually is not obvious. When taken as a whole, the Gospel raises many unanswered questions. Rather than clarifying what it means to be Christian, Matthew's Gospel highlights ambiguities in the way of Christian discipleship. Leaving aside the question of whether anything that could be called "Christian" even existed in Matthew's own day, instructions from Matthew's Jesus are confusing at best, and often apparently contradictory. Although Matthew's Jesus declares that his mission is only to the

"lost sheep of the house of Israel"² (10:6; 15:24), he instructs his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19). In the Sermon on the Mount, he instructs the crowds to "let their light shine" (5:16), then cautions them "not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (6:3), and warns them to pray and fast in secret (6:6, 18). Matthew's Jesus answers to our "Father in heaven" who refuses even to distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys. He "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (5:45). Matthew's Jesus compares God's kingdom to a field full of weeds and wheat that remain indistinguishable and are allowed to grow up and thrive together undisturbed (13:24–30) until the sheep are separated from the goats on the last day of judgment (25:31–46).

The lectionary compounds the problem by dividing the Gospel into pieces and rearranging their order. This disconnects narrative episodes from Matthew's story and associates them instead with a contemporary worshiper's concerns. So the Epiphany, when removed from Matthew's story and used as an annual liturgical event, tempts contemporary worshipers to take the visit of the Magi literally as a historical occurrence. The portion of the Sermon on the Mount that uses prayer, almsgiving, and fasting as specific examples in a larger argument become specific prescriptions for penitents on Ash Wednesday. The temptation of Jesus no longer introduces an important aspect of Jesus' character according to Matthew. Instead, the temptation becomes a Lenten warning about modern temptations sure to arise for a contemporary Christian.

Although the common lectionary's selective version of Matthew's Gospel

1. Matthew mentions the Pharisees more frequently than the other Gospels, almost always negatively. Matthew has thirty references to the Pharisees. Mark mentions them twelve times, Luke has twenty-seven occurrences of the term, and John mentions Pharisees twenty times.

2. Bible quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

distorts Matthew's Jesus and his message, it brings at least one important advantage: the lectionary presents the Gospel for public proclamation. Through the lectionary, contemporary worshippers share something of an ancient audience's experience of Matthew's Gospel: they hear it spoken aloud. For most members of its original audiences, the literature of the New Testament existed only in sound waves, and in the mental images they created. We take in the Gospel's message differently when listening as opposed to reading. In public performance, the Gospel takes on an embodied dimension, warmed and animated by a speaker's voice. Proclamation brings immediacy. Each of the Gospel's words exists only as long as a speaker's sounds penetrate the listener's ear. Their impact is immediate and is followed closely by the impact of subsequent words. Hearing the Gospel makes it a living thing.

Public performance is the primary way the Gospel became known in antiquity. As early as 1927, James A. Kleist recognized that "all ancient composition, including the New Testament, was primarily intended for the ear, rather than the eye."³ The Gospel's first audiences did not learn Matthew's story by reading it silently in private. Widespread reading was impossible because of the low literacy level in antiquity and the rarity of manuscripts, due to the expense of the time and materials required to produce them.⁴ The Gospel's first audiences heard it spoken aloud. Its message was delivered and comprehended live, during public performances.

How could ancient listeners discern

3. James A. Kleist, "Colometry and the New Testament," *Classical Bulletin* 3(1927), 18.

4. Margaret E. Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem, Ore: Polebridge, 2009), 11–32.

the Gospel's meaning and message in real time when that same message eludes silent readers of printed books? Modern readers of printed Bibles get a pre-digested version of the story after it has been translated into English, packaged in labeled sections and indexed by chapter and verse numbers. Its meaning has already been interpreted before a reader opens to the first page. A public performance presents the Gospel afresh. In the absence of titled sections and divisions by chapter and verse, listeners rely on auditory clues to organize their listening experience. A waiting audience listens with a blank slate. As a speaker spins a story word by word in a linear stream, listeners construct their sense of the whole.

Compositions composed for performance must direct an audience's attention using audible signals. To catch a composition's meaning, listeners must process sound efficiently. They lack the luxury of reflecting upon the nuances of every word uttered in a performance because words flow in a continuous stream. Listeners need to be able to distinguish meaningful sound from noise. They need to recognize and process whole groups of sounds in single units because they do not have time to think about each syllable separately. They need to know which sounds are the most important so they can focus on these and let less important sounds go by, like background music. Performances must train listeners' ears to hear important signals so that they can understand what takes place. Sound enables us to process information efficiently through its unique ability to penetrate a listener's consciousness, activate the imagination, and lock important information in memory.

Music achieves similar ear-training effects using repeating melodies, predictable harmonic cadences and rhythmic patterns. It is not necessary to listen all the way to the

end of "I Walk the Line" by Johnny Cash to catch its drift. The opening notes, plucked out on an acoustic guitar, evoke a familiar genre. Nor is it difficult to remember what the song is about because its refrain is short, memorable, and framed in a predictable rhythmic arrangement. The same is true for more complex musical compositions, even in music without words. The famous four-note sequence in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is as memorable as any country and western theme. Beethoven's theme consists of a simple rhythmic pattern of one note, repeated three times in quick succession, followed by a fourth note at a lower pitch that is sustained a little longer. This brief melody immediately establishes itself as the symphony's unifying musical motif. It recurs countless times in various pitches and at different speeds throughout the symphony, sometimes as melody, sometimes as counterpoint. Yet this short melody both unites the symphony and lends tremendous dramatic effect; nor would the symphony be improved by decreasing the frequency of the thematic melody or by varying it beyond recognition.

Performances of literary compositions employ similar tools to train their audiences so that they will hear and remember what is important. Think of the rhetorical power of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Repetition of a thematic phrase organizes a listener's experience and preserves it in memory, so that the recollection of a single phrase calls to mind a whole speech and its entire message. The New Testament Gospels were also composed to be spoken aloud in public and understood through listening, rather than private, silent reading. Like all literature composed for public performance, Matthew's Gospel had to offer clear auditory clues to guide a listening audience.

Audible signals must occur near the

beginning of a composition to effectively organize a listening experience. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony begins with its four-note theme and repeats it often and without embellishment in the symphony's first movement. In our country and western example, lyrics give a boost to melodic strains as the song trains a listener's ear. Johnny Cash's memorable theme, "I Walk the Line," is deferred until the end of the first stanza, but the song's first lines all end with rhyming word (mine, time, binds), so, when "I walk the line" concludes the stanza, it sounds natural because earlier sounds have trained listeners to anticipate those sounds. In the same way, the first audiences of Matthew's Gospel listened efficiently to public performances spoken aloud. Their ears were attuned to auditory clues, especially those at the beginning of a composition, because they organized subsequent sounds and directed an audience's attention.

Listening to auditory clues early in Matthew's Gospel can furnish important clues to the Gospel's meaning. Our listening skills fall short of those possessed by the Gospel's first audiences, if only because the Gospel's ancient listeners understood Hellenistic Greek. But the Gospel's sounds that guide a listening experience and organize its comprehension are encoded in its text. The lectionary's "film version" may distort Matthew's story, but a kind of musical version of the Gospel remains available to us. We can let the Gospel train our ears by paying attention to the beginning sounds in its first narrative section and Jesus' first great speech in the Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy. This seems natural enough to contemporary readers, since the Gospel presents a life of Jesus. Yet only two of the four canonical Gospels begin in this way, so not all the evangelists found it necessary

to include a genealogy. Moreover, Luke's genealogy is different than Matthew's, so readers should not suppose that the genealogies in Matthew and Luke are presented as historical records of Jesus' lineage. A different, deeper purpose is at work than simply conveying historical information. This is not unusual for genealogies in antiquity, including genealogies in the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, especially after the Deuteronomic reform and its interest in expunging foreign influences, genealogies generally served to establish the community's ethnic purity.⁵

Matthew's genealogy outlines the lineage of "the Christ," using the Greek word for the Hebrew term, "messiah," or "anointed one." Matthew's Gospel is notable for its frequent quotation of the Hebrew Scriptures and reference to Jewish law, so it is likely that the author of Matthew's Gospel was fully familiar with the genealogies in the Pentateuch and the prophets and understood their purposes in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Yet Matthew's genealogy is notable precisely for its inclusion of foreigners and sexually tainted women, including Tamar (1:2); Rahab (1:5); Ruth (1:5); and "Uriah's wife," Bathsheba (1:6). Vocalization of these names surely rang a sour note, or at least a discordant one, for the Gospel's first audiences.

Matthew's Gospel begins by employing a literary form, the genealogy, to achieve the opposite purpose for which a genealogy is usually employed. Instead of establishing Jesus' identity as a descendant from a purely Jewish community, Matthew laces his account of Jesus' lineage

with foreign women and shameful events: seduction, deception, and rape.⁷ Little wonder that the common lectionary omits Matthew's genealogy in its film version of Jesus' birth. The Gospel's opening sounds, those that guide its listeners and alert them to what is to come, sets form and content at odds, like fingernails scratching on a chalkboard.

Immediately following the genealogy, the narrative states that Mary's pregnancy occurred before her marriage. It explains that Joseph, her betrothed, was not responsible for her pregnancy but that he assumed responsibility by taking Mary for his wife (1:18–24). Thus both of Jesus' parents appear unrighteous in their own communities: Mary for becoming pregnant before her marriage and Joseph for accepting responsibility. The genealogy furnishes essential context for the story of Jesus' conception and his parents' marriage.⁸ Without the genealogy, the circumstances of Jesus' conception could be viewed as an inconvenient consequence of divine intervention. But the genealogy, the very purpose of which is to establish a character's identity, characterizes Jesus as inextricably connected to foreigners, non-Jews and women of questionable (or at least questioned) virtue. Jesus' parents are not exempt from Matthew's broadening picture of mixed heritage and questionable purity.

By the end of the first chapter in Matthew's Gospel, all possibility of characterizing Jesus as the paradigm of classic Jewish messianic expectation has been erased. The Gospel's author has invoked narrative themes from Jewish scriptures to overturn these expectations. Chapter two

5. Arland J. Hultgren, "Genealogy," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985).

6. R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel*, vol. 18, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967).

7. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 20–34.

8. Bernard Brandon Scott, "The Birth of the Reader," *Semeia* 52(1990).

relates the story of astrologers from the East, who recognize Jesus as the king of the Jews even before they find him (2:2). Matthew's story of the magi employs narrative strategies similar to those of the first chapter, where sounds clash with expectations and familiar traditions are turned on their heads. God's messenger sends Joseph and the family to Egypt after the magi's visit (2:13). Egypt, the symbol of Jewish slavery, becomes a place of shelter in Matthew's story. Joseph's departure from Bethlehem for Egypt enables Jesus to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents (2:16–18), which casts Herod, the "king of the Jews," in a role similar to the ancient Egyptian pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and whose slaughter of Jewish male infants Moses escaped (Exodus 1:15–22).

The beginning of Matthew's Gospel is the evangelist's own artwork, crafted to shape his life of Jesus in a particular way. The Gospel's two opening chapters consistently frustrate conventional expectations arising from the narratives of Hebrew scripture and its messianic themes. In fact, Matthew's Gospel invokes such conventions only to overturn their expected outcomes. The Gospel's first two chapters clearly depict Jesus as the anointed one, despite tainted ancestry and plot lines that deviate from the familiar stories of the patriarchs. So when the Gospel's author turns to material incorporated from other literary sources, those episodes have different impacts than the same stories in Matthew's sources. The Q story of John the Baptist's scolding of the Pharisees and Sadducees as "spawn of Satan" who claim Abraham as their father (3:7–10) resonates with the questions of paternity raised at the outset of the Gospel. In the Q story of Jesus' temptation in chapter four, the repeated taunt, "If you are the Son of God..." serves in Matthew's

Gospel (4:1–11) to deepen the ambiguity already established about the identity and paternity of the anointed one.

The Gospel's first narrative section concludes with the onset of Jesus' ministry and his preaching the kingdom of heaven (4:18), which lays the foundation for the remainder of the Gospel's plot. Thus the opening strains of Matthew, the "musical," sets out problems for the listener to solve. What does it mean to be a son of God? How can the anointed one have a tainted lineage and questionable parentage? Why does the righteousness of Joseph and Jesus appear unrighteous? How can the righteous children of God be distinguished from the unrighteous? What does Jesus mean when he preaches, "the kingdom of heaven" (4:17)?

The Gospel's opening narrative defines problems for its listeners to solve. Jesus' first great speech, the Sermon on the Mount, offers the ingredients for solution. However, these ingredients come in auditory signals to guide a listening ear. The Sermon on the Mount does not offer rational argument but orchestrated sounds.

The Sermon on the Mount takes approximately fifteen minutes to recite aloud. It addresses various and complex themes, touching on multiple topics. One need not explore the vast critical literature on the Sermon, from which no consensus emerges regarding its structure,⁹ to conclude that it is not logically organized. One need only perform the Sermon in English before a live, listening audience to encounter its lack of a conceptual organizational scheme. It is extremely difficult to make the Sermon compelling to a live audience if one's performance depends upon making logical

9. Margaret E. Lee, "A Method for Sound Analysis in Hellenistic Greek: The Sermon on the Mount as a Test Case" (D.Theol., Melbourne College of Divinity, 2005), 266–273.

connections. The Sermon simply does not comprise a unified, logical argument.

The Sermon's unity and coherence depend on the coordination of auditory patterns, not on syllogistic, rational reasoning. Such auditory patterns do not function at the level of conceptual logic. They work more like Beethoven's four-note theme, or Johnny Cash's repeating refrain. The beatitudes (5:2–11) are rich with auditory signals, as we would expect at the beginning of the Sermon. In a mere ten verses, the beatitudes organize a complex listening experience. Each beatitude begins with "blessed are....," a repeating refrain. Each time the refrain recurs, an audience knows a new listening unit has begun, since each iteration of "blessed" introduces a new beatitude. The refrain recurs frequently, drawing attention to the repetition itself as an organizing device and away from the specific details of the various beatitudes.

Like Beethoven's four-note theme, repetition of "blessed" in the beatitudes forecasts the Sermon's entire structural

organization.¹⁰ Repeating refrains introduce each of the Sermon's eight sections. Within each section, each iteration of the refrain introduces similarly-structured components, just as in the beatitudes.

Some of these repeating refrains are audible only in Greek, so our English versions of the New Testament keep aspects of the Sermon's organization hidden from modern readers. But like the repeating refrain in the beatitudes, the organizing themes of the salt-and-light section ("You are the salt of the earth...; You are the light of the world..." 5:13–16), and the antitheses ("You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you...; 5:21–47) are clearly audible in translation. These repeating sounds organize the Sermon, not by virtue of their semantic meaning but solely through sounds made familiar by repetition.

The beatitudes, with their quick repetition of "blessed" at the beginning of all ten beatitudes, trains listeners to recognize repeated beginning sounds as an identifying signal unifying a section

10. *Ibid.*, 47–54.

Sound Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Section	Section boundary	Repeated beginning sounds	Occurrences of repeated beginnings
1	5:3–12	Blessed are...	5:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
2	5:13–16	You are...	5:13, 14
3	5:17–20	Do not think...	5:17
4	5:21–48	You have heard that it was said...	5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43
5	6:1–18	Beware...; Whenever...	6:1, 2, 5, 7, 16
6	6:19—7:6	Do notæ... + [imperative verb]	6:19, 7:1, 6
7	7:7–20	[Imperative Verb]	7:7, 13, 15
8	7:21–28	(Not) everyone...	7:21, 24

of the Sermon. The Sermon fulfills the expectation of repeating beginning sounds. Like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, it employs gradually more complex strategies throughout the Sermon to articulate this organizing effect. For example, in section five of the Sermon containing the Lord's Prayer (6:1–18) the Sermon employs a double set of repeating sounds, "beware" and "whenever." In English, "beware" does not seem to be repeated within the section.

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But in Greek, the first syllable of the word for "beware" and the first syllable of the word "pray/prayer" is *pros-*. That sound occurs three times in rapid succession in different words in 6:1 beginning with "beware," establishing the sound as an organizing device. When the *pros-* sound recurs in the section on prayer, it is recognizable as an organizational signal.

The Sermon's sound effects become more complex in section six (6:19–7:6) when the only repeated sound at the beginning of each component part of that section is the Greek word for "no" or "do not." The prohibition "do not"

occurs at the beginning of each of these component units. The correlative sound effect, a repeated (positive) imperative verb, organizes the Sermon's seventh section (7:7–20). As in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the simple device of repeated short phrases can remain an effective organizing strategy throughout a complex composition by occurring in varied and increasingly sophisticated ways.

The sheer orchestration of sound in Beethoven and in Matthew's Gospel creates beauty, evokes profound ideas, and has a dramatic effect. Within the Sermon on the Mount's audible structure emerge key thematic phrases that function like recurring melodies throughout the Gospel. The beatitudes introduce these interconnected musical themes. This is what we would expect in a live performance spoken aloud, since important auditory signals must occur at the beginning to shape listener expectations. "The kingdom of heaven" occurs at the beginning and end of the beatitudes (5:3, 10). The contrasting term, "earth," occurs in the third beatitude when the meek are told they will inherit the earth (5:5). "Righteousness" occurs twice in the beatitudes (5:6, 10), and the second time it is connected with the kingdom of heaven.

Subsequently in the Sermon, the kingdom of heaven theme is elaborated in section five with the recurrence of "Our Father who is in heaven." These key phrases, "the kingdom of heaven," "our father who is in heaven," the paired terms "heaven" and "earth," and "righteousness" do not summarize the Sermon's content but they supply strong melodic themes that recur throughout the Gospel in harmony and counterpoint to elaborate a story of a heavenly kingdom already present on earth. Like weeds growing up with wheat, righteousness and unrighteousness remain indistinguishable except to the Father who

is in heaven. People become children of the Father by living in the heavenly kingdom on earth and recognizing God-with-us, Emmanuel, in the “least of these.” The heavenly kingdom is available to all on earth, including “all the nations,” toward whom Jesus directs his disciples in the Great Commission.

We will never arrive at a single, definitive interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel. However, attention to its opening sounds can suggest keys to understanding the Gospel story in a new way. The common lectionary invites us to listen to the Gospel. Accepting this invitation brings us closer to the experience of the Gospel’s first audiences who heard it proclaimed aloud and recognized every reprise of its melodic themes as the tale unfolded. Hearing the Gospel and attending to its auditory clues, like we listen to music, makes its message accessible in a new way. Rather than responding to modern, conceptual questions about personal salvation or the superiority of Christianity, Matthew’s Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount can be received as symphonies of sound that invite us to reflect anew on the meaning of righteousness, mercy, God-with-us, and the kingdom of heaven.

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Jesus' Healing Stories: Imperial Critique and Eschatological Anticipations in Matthew's Gospel

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What are we to make of the prominent place that Matthew's Gospel gives to Jesus' miracle-working, particularly his healings and exorcisms?

As Jesus' public activity begins, a summary highlights Jesus' teaching, proclaiming, and healing:

...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.... (Matt 4:23–24).

After three chapters of teaching (the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5–7), two chapters follow that narrate seven healings (8:1–4, 5–13, 14–15; 9:2–8, 18–26, 27–31), two exorcisms (8:28–34; 9:32–34), and a storm-calming (8:23–27). The summaries in 8:16 and 9:35 generalize the healings and exorcisms to suggest extensive activity. After chapters 8 and 9 follow further healings (12:9–14; 14:34–36; 15:29–31; 20:29–34; 21:14) and exorcisms (12:22; 15:21–28; 17:14–20), as well as feedings (14:13–21; 15:32–39), walking on water (14:22–33), producing

a coin from a fish's mouth (17:24–27), cursing a fig tree (21:18–19), and rising from the dead (chapter 28).

What contributions do Jesus' miracle-working acts make to the Gospel narrative? Some approaches have seen them as "religious" stories concerned with Christology, somehow "proving" that Jesus is the Messiah or that he is "divine." Other approaches "spiritualize" the stories as exhibiting features of discipleship such as understanding, faith, and obedience. Yet other approaches have focused on their social function. They are seen as asserting boundaries vis-à-vis other groups in conflict situations and maintaining the interests and identity of Jesus-followers. And, of course, rationalist approaches have sought to recast the miraculous by domesticating it to a "cause-and effect" worldview. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, results when crowd members are shamed by the boy's example into sharing their food.

These approaches have produced much insight into these rich stories. Yet, despite their diverse perspectives, they share a problematic feature. Attention to Christology and discipleship, and communal conflicts and social identity has, ironically, diverted focus from the miracles themselves. More specifically,

these approaches decenter the material transformations that the healing and exorcism stories narrate.

In this discussion, my concern is to re-center the material transformations. My interest is not an apologetic for miracles but an elaboration of the significance of these accounts of material transformation as part of Matthew's good news. Because of limits of space, we will focus predominantly on the healings and exorcisms.

1. *Matthew 11:2–6 and Isaiah*

Our starting point is the beginning of the Gospel's third narrative section (11:2—16:20).¹

From prison, John, last referred to in 4:12 when he was arrested, sends his disciples to inquire about Jesus:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Matt 11:2–6

Commentators conventionally note two contexts for this passage.

The passage selectively reviews Jesus' activity since the beginning of his public ministry in 4:17. Jesus' response to the inquiry from John's disciples about his identity comprises an invitation to discern the significance of his actions for his identity. The sustained sequence of miracle stories in chapters 8 and 9 is particularly in view. There, in Jesus' actions, "the blind receive

their sight" (9:27–31), "the lame walk" (8:5–13; 9:1–8), "the lepers are cleansed" (8:1–4), "the deaf hear" (9:32–34), "the dead are raised" (9:18–19, 23–26), and "the poor have good news brought to them" (4:17, 23–25; 5:3—7:29; 9:35; 11:1; including the sick who are healed [8:15; 9:20–22] and the demon-possessed who are exorcized [8:16, 28–34; 9:32–33]). This is "what the Messiah was doing" (11:2).

Intertextually, the response of Matthew's Jesus evokes language and themes from Isaiah: Isa 26:19 (the dead), 29:18 (the deaf and blind), 35:5–6 (the blind, deaf, and lame), 42:7 (the blind), 61:1 (the poor and blind). These material transformations are part of God's justice that Isaiah envisions coming among humans: "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you" (Isa 35:4). God's servant "will bring forth justice to the nations. . . He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;" (Isa 42:1–4). This justice is envisioned as God's intervention through (as well as against) Assyria (Isa 10:5–19) and through Cyrus the Persian (Isa 44:28—45:1) against Babylon (Isa 13; 43:14). God intervenes in a world that is not aligned with God's purposes. God's intervention rectifies this situation, bringing the world into alignment with God's will.

A cluster of events, present and future, accomplishes God's purpose according to Isaiah. God effects judgment "against all the nations" (Isa 34:2), including the defeat of Judah's enemies (chapters 13—33). God also effects the judgment (Isa 10:11, 29) and vindication of Jerusalem and Judah (Isa 24:23; 27:13; 40:9–11; 44:26–28). God also transforms wilderness into abundant fertility (Isa 35:1–2, 6b; 41:17–20; 55:13), restores the sick to wholeness (Isa 35:5–6a; 42:7), ends death and suffering,

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, Revised Edition (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2004), 140–153.

and supplies abundant food for all people (Isa 25:6–10). “It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (25:9). That is, in evoking Isaiah, Matthew’s Jesus brings into play a multifaceted vision of God’s salvific intervention that materially and physically transforms the world.

It is important to recognize the significance of evoking Isaiah’s vision of a transformed world that involves the subjugation of the nations, the gathering of God’s people, the healing of the sick, the

The Gospel regularly evokes Isaiah to elaborate and interpret Jesus’ God-given commission to manifest God’s saving presence (1:21–23) and reign or empire (4:17).

feeding of those without food, the end of death and suffering, and the inclusion of all people in God’s purposes. The Gospel regularly evokes Isaiah to elaborate and interpret Jesus’ God-given commission to manifest God’s saving presence (1:21–23) and reign or empire (4:17).

- In declaring Jesus’ identity and mission as “God with us” (1:23), the Gospel

evokes Isa 7—9.² These Isaiah chapters address a situation of imperial threat that King Ahaz of Judah faces from Kings Rezin and Pekah of Syria and Israel and from the super-power Assyria. God offers the unreceptive Ahaz a sign, the conception of a child to be named “Emmanuel” (Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10). This child signifies God’s saving presence, the continuation of David’s line, and the people’s future. The chapters narrate resistance and refusal to trust God’s word and saving work (7:3–13), the role of imperial power as a means of divine punishment (Isa 7:17–25; 8:8–15), and God’s purposes of saving the people from that power (7:19; 8:1–4; 9:1–7). Evoking Isa 7—9 establishes an analogy with the situation of the Gospel’s audience. The latter also live under imperial power, that of Rome, and are also promised God’s salvation (1:21). By analogy, the Isaiah paradigm simultaneously frames Rome as God’s agent in punishing Jerusalem (22:7) and provides assurance that God will overcome Rome to establish God’s purposes (24:27–31). Chapters 7 through 9 of Isaiah elaborate Jesus’ mission to manifest God’s saving presence in a world dominated by Roman power (Matt 1:21–23).

- In Matt 3:3 John is introduced with an Isaiah citation. Isa 40:3 addresses the community exiled in Babylon after Jerusalem’s destruction in 587 B.C.E. The text announces God’s intervention

2. Warren Carter, “Evoking Isaiah: Why Summon Isaiah in Matthew 1:23 and 4:15–16?” in Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 93–107. For discussion of Matthew’s other Isaiah citations, Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

to reverse this situation through Cyrus the Persian and the exiles' return to their land (Isa 44:28—45:1). Its use in Matt 3 in relation to John some six hundred years later involves some obvious differences. The place is Judea, not Babylon. Rome, not Babylon, is in power. Jesus not Cyrus is the anointed one (Matt 1:1, 16–17; Isa 44:28—45:1). But there is a fundamental continuity. God continues to assert God's reign or empire (3:2) in the midst of and to deliver people from oppressive imperial power. Just as Babylon's empire had fallen, so also will Rome's.

- In 4:15–16, Matthew cites Isa 9:1–2, a second evoking of the paradigmatic Isa 7–9. Elaborating this intertext highlights both the reality of imperial power and the promise of God's salvation or transforming power ("light") now manifested in Jesus in the midst of Rome's imperial world ("Galilee under the Gentiles"). In addition to these affirmations, the citation raises the question as to how Jesus will carry out this "light-bringing" mission. It thus points forward to Jesus' public activity that commences in 4:17 with his declaration concerning God's reign or empire and his miraculous actions (4:23–24).
- In 8:17, Jesus' healings and exorcisms are interpreted in terms of Isa 53:4, "he took our infirmities and bore our diseases." The link establishes that Jesus' actions are in accord with and carry out God's purposes. But the connection with Isa 53 is something of a stretch. Whereas the servant (Israel or a group within it) suffers on behalf of the people and bears that suffering in his own body (Isa 53:4–7), Jesus "took away" or heals diseases.
- The fifth explicit citation from Isaiah involves Isa 42:1–4 in Matt 12:17–21. Again healing is prominent in the

context (12:15) though the citation's referent probably includes numerous aspects of chapters 11–13 such as Jesus' God-given authority, the Spirit's activity, and the involvement of Gentiles as recipients of justice. The Isaiah context—deliverance from Babylon's imperial power—also contributes in that it contrasts the difference between God's merciful ways of working for all people with conventional imperial (Roman) ways of asserting control.

With these citations, interpreters conventionally emphasize the "fulfillment" of Isaiah's "messianic" prophecies in Jesus' mission. But this approach focusing on Jesus overplays the messianic role since the material from Isaiah scarcely mentions a messiah (apart from Cyrus). It also seriously underplays the imperial and material dimensions of Isaiah's address and vision of God's salvific intervention. Interpreters frequently and mistakenly spiritualize the Isaiah citations and the Gospel, but imperial power and material transformation should not be so readily dismissed. Both imperial power and material brokenness were integral parts of Isaiah's and Matthew's worlds. Both figures envisage their material transformation.

2. A third context: Imperial realities

While narrative and intertextual contexts are significant dimensions of 11:2–6, a third context, that of the world of the Roman Empire, has frequently been neglected. Yet there is no doubt about its relevance even though discussions of Matthew's Gospel, indeed of the New Testament literature generally, often pretend these "religious" texts and their interpretation have no relation to their socio-political worlds.

The Roman Empire constituted the world from which Matthew's Gospel origi-

nated and which it engaged. The empire comprised a hierarchical system of vast societal inequalities, economic exploitation, and political oppression.³ Tacitus has the British chief Calgacus identify the very tangible damage of Roman rule: “our goods and chattels go for tribute; our lands and harvests in requisitions of grain” (*Agricola* 31). This transfer of resources meant a depleted existence for many.

In broad strokes, the empire's socio-economic structure essentially comprised two groups, elites and non-elites. There was no middle class and no “Roman dream” whereby people pulled themselves up by the sandal straps. There were huge discrepancies in wealth, power, and status. The ruling elite comprising both Roman and allied provincials—perhaps 2 percent of the population—controlled political, religious, and legal institutions; the military; and economic activity (resources). Land, predominantly in elite control, was the basic source of wealth and power in this largely agrarian empire. Elites secured wealth through slave labor, taxes and rents (often paid in kind), investments, involvements in commerce and banking, and from peasant farmers defaulting on loans, rents, and/or taxes.

Non-elites, who in all likelihood, comprised most if not all of Matthew's audience, had comparatively little wealth, power, or status. Poverty was pervasive,⁴

3. For example, Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Janet Huskinson, ed., *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000); Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

4. Chris R. Whittaker, “The Poor.” In *Romans*, Andrea Giardina, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993),

though there were varying levels of poverty. Some traders, merchants, and skilled artisans enjoyed a reasonable and somewhat stable level of existence. But the majority lived around subsistence level, periodically cycling above and below it. Unskilled urban workers, rural peasants on small landholdings, day laborers, and slaves who provided cheap labor, struggled to survive while their labor and skills served elite interests. Estimates of pre-industrial cities identify:

- four to eight percent as incapable of providing food and housing for themselves, and living as beggars,
- twenty percent in permanent crisis,
- and thirty–forty percent (artisans, shopkeepers, and traders) who temporarily fell below subsistence levels.

Dropping permanently or temporarily below subsistence level depended on work availability, harvest yields, disease, weather, high prices, profiteering, short food supply, low wages, housing costs etc. In such circumstances, involvement in patron-client relations could be a life saver. In return for skills, labor, and displays of public honor, patrons provided non-elites with some material resources.

3. The Mediterranean diet: Empire and health?

Imperial structures are bad for the emotional and physical health of most of their subjects. Predictably the imperial system benefitted the minority elites. They fared well with access to plentiful resources that sustained their lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. By contrast, non-elites, the vast majority living in pervasive poverty, were significantly disadvantaged. For many, living conditions were atrocious, marked by squalor, garbage, human

excrement, animals, disease, crime, fire risk, overcrowding, natural disasters, and unstable dwellings.

Control of and access to food was an integral part of the imperial system.⁵ Food was power and reflected societal divisions and power inequities. Food was a key aspect of the elite's conspicuous consumption. By some estimates, elites consumed over 50 percent of agrarian production while most of the population lived around subsistence levels.

The lack of adequate food resources signified a lack of power, wealth, and status. While elites ate well, the diets of most non-elites, comprising grains, beans, olives, and vine products, were marked by limited variety, availability, and low nutritional quality. Access to food was negatively impacted by limited purchasing power, market prices, irregular employment (especially in cities), urban overcrowding, poor storage, and irregular supplies resulting from poor soil quality, weather, seasonal fluctuations, and transportation challenges. Recognizing the continuous challenge of procuring nutritionally adequate food, Peter Garnsey argues that, "for most people, life was a perpetual struggle for survival."⁶ He posits that because of strategies employed by both elites and non-elites, famine was reasonably rare and episodic while food shortages were common and endemic.

One of the serious consequences of the inadequate nutrition that resulted from imperial structures was a context conducive for diseases of deficiency and contagion. In relation to diseases of deficiency, malnutrition was a serious problem. The physician Galen "describes a famine during which peasants in the countryside

consumed foods of poor quality (including bulbs, tree shoots, and boiled grass) and developed a huge variety of skin conditions (boils, shingles, erysipelas, carbuncles, putrid abscesses....)"⁷

Noting widespread malnutrition,⁸ Garnsey argues that, at least in theory, the common wheat-based diet, if available in sufficient quantity and quality, could supply adequate protein, calories, and vitamins B and E. But in actuality, the quality and quantity of grains varied greatly, resulting

By some estimates, elites consumed over 50 percent of agrarian production while most of the population lived around subsistence levels.

in diets deficient for many in numerous minerals and vitamins especially A, C, and D. Vitamin A deficiency contributes particularly to blindness, bone deformation, growth retardation, and lowered immunity. Vitamin C deficiency results in scurvy and retarded development of bones and teeth. Vitamin D contributes to muscle weakness and limited bone growth.

5. Much of the following draws from Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

6. *Ibid.*, ix.

7. Susan Mattern, *Galen and the Rhetoric of Healing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 153.

8. Garnsey, 51–60.

While wheat was a staple, it was not the only food available. Garnsey estimates that non-cereal sources accounted for perhaps 25 percent of energy requirements, principally dry legumes, wine, olive oil, and perhaps occasionally a few fresh vegetables. But even with this recognition, inadequate nutrition was a widespread

average life expectancy at birth was about 21 to 22 years, and at age 10 about thirty-five further years.⁹ Infant mortality was high. Ann Hanson suggests that "about half the babies born died before reaching their fifth birthday." Of those who reached age 10, nearly half reached age 50. In overall terms, "less than 20 percent" reached the age of 60.

**The lethal
quality of this
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is evident in short
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mortality rates.**

phenomenon with devastating somatic impact. Garnsey particularly highlights the pervasiveness of bladder-stones, eye diseases, and rickets.

Malnutrition and diseases of deficiency render people more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Diarrhea, dysentery, skin rashes, cholera, typhus, meningitis, measles, scarlet fever, and smallpox affected many. Prime conditions for spreading contagious diseases included water storage, urban overcrowding, ignorance of basic hygiene, disease-carrying animals and insects, and the lack of adequate medical interventions (vaccinations, antibiotics, etc.).

The lethal quality of this imperial existence is evident in short life spans and high mortality rates. Bruce Frier points to the table of the third century C.E. Roman jurist Ulpian, to census returns from Egypt, and to gravestone studies that suggest the

In addition, numerous studies have linked psychosomatic illness and demonic possession with imperial and oppressive contexts.¹⁰ In his study of the impact of imperial power in French-dominated Algeria, Frantz Fanon describes the physical impact of colonial power on frightened locals: "his glance...shrivels me up...freezes me, and his voice...turns me into stone..." Fanon also notes the prevalence of symptoms of pains, menstruation disorders, and muscular rigidity and paralysis in this imperial context. Reporting on Serbian imperialism in Kosovo in 1999, reporter Deborah Amos observed extensive paralysis and muteness in response to the trauma and violence, phenomena commonly attested in research on trauma effects.

These responses of paralysis and muteness suggest people overwhelmed by power. Fanon also suggests these responses are coping mechanisms, even self-protective protests against imperial power

9. Bruce Frier, "Roman Demography," in David Potter and David Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 85–109, esp. 87–88; Ann E. Hanson, "The Roman Family," in Potter and Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death*, 19–66, esp. 27.

10. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), esp. 45, 53, 289–293; Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 567–588; Deborah Amos, "The Littlest Victims," *ABC News*, April 13, 1999.

through inactivity and non-compliance. In Matthew, the paralyzed (4:24; 8:6; 9:2, 6), shriveled up (12:10), and mute or deaf (9:32–33; 11:5; 12:22; 15:30–31) frequent the Gospel, it seems, both embodying and protesting the traumatic impact of Roman power.

So, too, do the demoniacs (4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:22; 15:22). Fanon notes the schizophrenic identity of oppressed people who despise exploitative power, cooperate to survive, and acknowledge its desirability in seeking to be free. Such individuals frequently understand the conflicts and divided self in terms of traditional cosmic myths and evil spirits. So Matthew's Gospel, having asserted the devil's control of the world's empires (4:8) thereby making Rome's power the agent of Satan's control, narrates Jesus casting a demon out of two men into a herd of pigs who destroy themselves in the sea (8:26–34). Significantly, the pig was the mascot of the Roman Tenth *Fretensis* Legion stationed in Syria that had fought against Jerusalem in the 66–70 C.E. war. The scene depicts the demon-possessed nature of the present, and the people's desire for Jesus to be their savior in asserting God's authority by destroying Rome. In the meantime, demoniacs embody and personalize Rome's demonic rule. Jesus' exorcisms are a direct confrontation with the "power behind the throne," a subversion of Roman rule. They assert God's empire (12:28).

4. Matthew, imperial diseases, and healing

It is no wonder that Matthew's Gospel, originating in this late first-century imperial world, is peopled with sick and demon-possessed folks. These folks pervade the narrative just as they pervaded the ancient world. They embody the diseases of deficiency and contagion, the high death

rates, and short life-spans that marked the imperial world. They demonstrate the destructiveness of the system of power that was the empire's food supply which privileged elites and deprived non-elites of access to nutritionally adequate food.

Of what significance, then, are Matthew's narratives of Jesus' miraculous actions of healing and exorcism?

Jesus' healings expose the lie of imperial propaganda. Across the first century, imperial propaganda had claimed that the emperors Augustus and Domitian had initiated a golden age marked by abundant fertility, food, and health (Horace, *Carmen saeculare*; Statius, *Silvae*, 4.1.17–37). But clearly a golden age had not materialized for most of the empire's inhabitants. Jesus' transformative actions resemble imperial aspirations even while they show the empire to be powerless to reverse the social experience it maintained. The healings and exorcisms repair this imperial damage, exposing and reversing its lethal impact. Likewise, Matthew's scenes of feeding the five and four thousands (14:13–21; 15:32–39)—following a healing summary in 15:29–31—demonstrate bountiful supply of food for hungry people. Jesus imitates this imperial agenda but delivers on it, something imperial practices and structures had not effected for most of the population.

Yet Matthew's citation in 11:2–6 of Isaiah's vision of a transformed world in which God's reign heals bodies suggests more is on display. Various Jewish eschatological writings that negotiate the imperial world by envisioning the final establishment of God's salvific purposes feature physical restoration and supplies of abundant food as divine acts of restorative justice. For example, 4 Ezra, written in the same post-70 time period as Matthew, anticipates the "immortal age to come, in which corruption has

passed away, sinful indulgence has come to an end, unbelief has been cut off, and righteousness has increased and truth has appeared" (7:112–115). But Ezra laments that not all will be saved to enjoy these benefits:

What good is it...that safe and healthful habitations have been reserved for us.....Or that a paradise shall be revealed whose fruit remains unspoiled and in which are abundance and healing...(4 Ezra 7:121–124)

The angel assures Ezra that he will participate in the establishment of God's purposes:

...for you Paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand. The root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished from you and death is hidden; hell has fled and corruption has been forgotten; sorrows have passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest. (4 Ezra 8:52–54).

Healing and fertility play important roles in this new world. Material transformation is the name of the eschatological (end) game.

The new world of 2 Baruch, also contemporaneous with Matthew, is likewise marked by abundant fertility and physical wholeness.

The earth will also yield fruits ten thousand fold. And on one vine will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine.

And those who are hungry will enjoy themselves and they will, moreover, see marvels every day. For winds will go out in front of me every morning...and clouds at the end of the day to distill the dew of health. And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high and they will eat of it...(29:5).

It also ends imperial rule (72:2–6) and establishes peace, joy, and rest (73:1).

Then health will descend in dew, and illness will vanish, and fear and tribulation and lamentation will pass away...(73:2).

That is, the life of the age-to-come under God's sovereignty effects material transformation.

Jesus' healings and exorcisms, like his declaration of the presence and future of God's reign or empire (4:17; 12:28), belong with these eschatological visions. Disease disrupts the divinely-desired social experience. Jesus' actions anticipate what God is yet to establish in full. They participate in and are forerunners of the transformed material existence that contrasts with and overcomes the damaging effects of the present age under Roman rule. These actions manifest the presence of God's reign or empire in the midst of Rome's empire even now. They oppose, even while they also imitate, imperial visions and practices in implementing God's materially transforming reign or empire. That is, they demonstrate that God's salvific purposes are not only matters of the "soul" or "spirit"; they are somatic, material, and societal.



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Dr. Justo L. González, a native of Cuba, is a retired professor of historical theology. After completing his PhD in historical theology at Yale University in 1961, he taught at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico for eight years. He then taught for another eight years at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. For the last thirty years he has focused on developing programs for the theological education of Hispanics, resulting in the founding of the Asociación par la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH), the Hispanic Summer Program (HSP), and the Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI). His books, which include *The Story of Christianity* (2 vols.) and *A History of Christian Thought* (3 vols.), have been translated into nine languages. Besides his PhD degree from Yale, he has received four honorary doctorates.

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Book Reviews

The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus. By Dale C. Allison Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. 126 pages. Paper. \$16.00

This short gem of a book records Allison's Kenneth W. Clark Lectures delivered at Duke University in February 2008.

The title flips the Bultmannian distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith used to challenged students to approach Gospel study with healthy skepticism and critical analysis. To be sure Allison does not reject the quest for the historical Jesus—an endeavor at the heart of his scholarship throughout his career—for he describes his own quest as “doubt seeking understanding.”

The transposition asks whether the quest for the historical Jesus has resulted in a more accurate understanding of the Christ of faith. While questers Funk, Borg, Crossan, Wright, and Sanders follow a similar methodology, they leave us asking “Will the real Jesus please stand up?” Allison concludes that current criteria of dissimilarity, multiple attestation, embarrassment, and coherence create a Jesus in one's own image. Similarly most pastors' images of Jesus were shaped by what felt comfortable in seminary.

Allison does not mince words in criticizing the current state of Jesus scholarship (chapters 1–2). He follows with an alternative based on the way human memory works—retaining generalities, while forgetting particulars—in order to focus on general patterns in the Gospel accounts (chapter 3). The result: a Jesus conscious of his own messianic role, making uncommonly difficult demands, and displaying acts of power.

Not surprisingly, Allison comes down at the end (chapter 4) with an eschatological Jesus—shaped by his early study of Schweitzer and exhibited in his own theological contributions: *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* and his three-volume commentary on Matthew. The Christology of the church

is too high, that of the Jesus Seminar far too low. Following Schweitzer, Jesus must remain an enigma who challenges and keeps one from becoming too comfortable.

Allison concludes with three personal impressions (chapter 5): Jesus' understanding of God as “Father” emphasizes divine love in the midst of human woe; Jesus' calls for transformation to what ought to be, not complacency with what is; and Jesus' whole life embodies the coincidence of opposites. Thus a poignant finale: “For the resurrection does not balance crucifixion and the grave. It defeats them.” (119).

This book, filled with wit and pithy turns of phrase, will appeal to laity struggling over reports from the Jesus Seminar; veteran pastors ready for a sabbatical; and students who agree that “the unexamined Christ is not worth having.”

Fred Strickert
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Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision. By N. T. Wright. Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009. 279 pages. Cloth. \$25.00.

In preaching classes I periodically ask the student preachers, “Why didn't you preach on that part of the biblical text that refers to, for example, doing good works? the fruits of the Spirit? being judged by works?” The most common refrain—almost a liturgical refrain—is, “But that would be works-righteousness!” In his latest book, a brilliantly written one at that, N.T. Wright responds in a variety of ways to this issue and the adjacent theological issues surrounding the topic of justification.

The book was conceived as a response to an earlier work by a Minnesota Baptist pastor, John Piper. Wright, with his jaunty and laser-sharp sense of humor and scholarship, takes up the challenge. Using key texts by Paul, he accomplishes the following tasks: a response to Piper; a critique of Lutheran and Calvinist theology; and the construction of a deeper and fuller view of how we might regard justification today.



Wright's critique of many historical and contemporary versions of justification is that they do not go far enough in including what his reading of the biblical texts requires. Emerging from the early 1980s, two major camps form the general backdrop for Wright's arguments. These involve the conflict in biblical studies between the Old and New Perspectives on Paul. Generally defined, the former rely on theological traditions and doctrines (especially Lutheran and Reformed) for their interpretive biblical work on Paul, while the New Perspective crowd re-visits the same hermeneutical field to frame Pauline materials through the primary lens of first-century Judaism. The missing piece for those outside the biblical field is that one may only piece this together, because the book never defines these two camps explicitly and the terms are not indexed.

Wright's views on justification are developed in three chapters devoted to the contextual realities of first-century Judaism, which include the Pauline uses of three major Judaic realities: covenant, law, and law court. This is followed by a fourth chapter outlining the various definitions and issues around the term "justification."

Section II of the work (Chapters 5–8) features in-depth exegetical work on these terms via contextual readings of Galatians, Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Romans. An example of Wright's succinct discussion of issues related to denominational views of justification is offered in his commentary on Romans 10:4. This commentary "gives off its full resonance not within the Lutheran scheme whereby the law is a bad thing abolished in Christ, nor within the Calvinist scheme whereby the law is a good thing which Christ obeyed and thus procured 'righteousness' (works-righteousness, we note) to be then 'imputed' to those who believe, but within Paul's own Jewish framework of thought, the narrative of God and his faithfulness to Israel which has reached its destination in the Messiah" (244).

Wright's work is brilliant, so full of inter-textual allusions and quotes that one can only stand in awe of the final product!

Susan K. Hedahl
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At-Tuwani Journal: Hope and Nonviolent Action in a Palestinian Village. By

Arthur G. Gish. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania and Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2008. ISBN-10: 0836194063. ISBN-13: 978-0836194067. 363 pages. Paper. \$17.99.

The 2001 publication of *Hebron Journal* records Arthur Gish's experiences as a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) in Hebron for two or three months annually from December 1995 until January 31, 2001. Now his *At-Tuwani Journal* documents his annual two to three month stays from December 2004 until February 2008 with the people of Tuwani, a Palestinian village located ten to fifteen miles south of Hebron.

Tuwani is a tiny yet strategic village for the CPT's focus because of its location in the corridor running south of Hebron to the West Bank border with Israel's Negev area. The Palestinians living in this part of the occupied West Bank are being impacted adversely by harassment from the residents of the nearby Jewish settlement of Maon and the largely hostile actions of Israeli soldiers assigned to that region (for example, by denying the villagers access to roads or pasture land).

Since 2004, CPT members and representatives of an Italian peace group called Operation Dove have jointly moved to Tuwani to maintain an international presence in the region with at least four volunteers at all times. As peace workers, they daily monitor the activities of the settlers and Israeli military—recorded in great detail in Gish's journal. His entries include descriptions of their presence with village farmers as they plow their fields or harvest their olive trees, accompaniment of shepherds grazing their sheep in the area, and escorting of school children who walk to the regional school, often forced to take a circuitous route—with the reluctant help of Israeli soldiers. Repeatedly, Gish describes the settlers' menacing acts designed to make life unbearable for the Palestinians—the destruction of olive trees, theft of farming equipment, abusive language and outright attacks, and, most tellingly, the gradual confiscation of land. Since they are under military occupation, the villagers have no way to appeal,



insofar as the soldiers seldom constrain the settlers but rather predictably blame the villagers and internationals for any trouble that occurs.

This journal preserves a crucial documentation of daily attacks and threats against the villagers. Somewhat tedious to read, it also includes comments by Gish about his own struggle to control his anger over the unjust situations he observes as well as his intent to pursue a non-violent approach to both settlers and soldiers. His frequent attempts to interact with both groups as a way of humanizing them most often meet with little response.

Clear about the futility of the use of violence in overcoming evil, Gish speaks of the villagers' persistent and creative responses to the daily attacks against them. He writes:

Every time the soldiers or settlers do something bad, the villagers are out there confronting the soldiers and settlers. The soldiers do not know how to fight this battle. If the villagers used violence, the soldiers would know to respond...It is a constant struggle here in the village over whether the villagers will remain nonviolent. The temptation to use violence is strong. Violence sounds like a quick fix, but there are no quick fixes. Most of the villagers understand that we are engaged in a long, serious struggle (254).

Gish recognizes a clear strategy at work in the South Hebron Hills—"to rid the region of its Palestinian inhabitants, part of a dangerous dream of creating a greater Israel" (383). In 2008, he saw little evidence that either the Israeli or the United States government would change policies to encourage peace. Nonetheless, he does hold hope for a better future for Palestinians and Israelis alike—one that springs from his trust in a just God and in the daily resistance of villagers like those of Tuwani who refuse to be driven from their homes and land. The tenacious and courageous presence of the international peace workers like Arthur Gish in Hebron and Tuwani offers another reason for hope.

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Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931.

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 10. English edition edited by Clifford J. Green and translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008. ISBN-10: 0800683307. ISBN-13: 978-0800683306. xxv and 764 pages. Cloth. \$60.00.

Berlin: 1932-1933. By Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 12. English edition edited by Larry L. Rasmussen and translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins with supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. ISBN-10: 0800683129. ISBN-13: 978-0800683122. xxii and 680 pages. Cloth. \$55.00.

These recent additions to the sixteen-volume English translation of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works are a treasure trove of historical and biographical knowledge about both the young Bonhoeffer and his times. The times were those leading up to the accession to power by Hitler and the National Socialist Party in January 1933. Viewing this history through the lens of a particular historical figure lends considerable insight into how life unfolded in Germany at the end of the Weimar Republic and the dawn of the Nazi tyranny.

Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931 assembles materials from three formative years in Bonhoeffer's life that shaped who he would become in the ensuing church struggle: a first year served as vicar for a German expatriate congregation in Barcelona, a second year in Berlin when he completed his second dissertation (which gave the credentials necessary for university teaching), and another year spent as a postdoctoral fellow in New York (which dramatically altered the course of his ministry). Both of the volumes considered in this review include a large collection of letters and documents pertinent to Bonhoeffer's life. These elucidate his relationships to family members, friends, ecclesial colleagues, and members of the academy.

Volume 10 also includes a significant



number of sermons, catechetical lessons, and addresses, particularly from his vicariate year in Barcelona. Among the materials from his academic activity in Berlin are a eulogy delivered at the death of Adolf von Harnack (Bonhoeffer spoke on behalf of Harnack's last circle of students) and Bonhoeffer's inaugural lecture at the University of Berlin on "The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology." Given his later concentration on the writing of *Ethics*, it is noteworthy that already at this stage in his academic development Bonhoeffer was devoting significant attention to ethical themes—from an address on "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic" prepared for his congregation in Barcelona to the several seminary works produced at Union Theological Seminary in New York on core ethical themes ("Reading Notes for the Course 'Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature,'" "Course Paper: The Character and Ethical Consequences of Religious Determinism," or "Course Paper: The Religious Experience of Grace and the Ethical Life"). Less obvious from the documents, but all the more influential during the time in New York was Bonhoeffer's participation in the life of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem (see Editor's Introduction, pp. 29-32).

Berlin: 1932-1933 documents material from Bonhoeffer's literary legacy during the year when Hitler came to power. Among the letters are Bonhoeffer's explanation of the interrupted radio broadcast of his lecture on "The Younger Generation's Altered View of the Concept of Führer" (the text of that address is also included) and correspondence related to the emerging church resistance, including letters to and from Karl Barth. It is striking how early and consistently Bonhoeffer engaged themes which proved to be core to opposing the Nazi menace: "Lecture: 'The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation,'" "Essay: 'The Church and the Jewish Question,'" and "Memorandum: 'The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis.'" The sermons also disclose, in the words of the editor, "a call to churchly repentance and to the sharp contours of a strong, independent Christian faith, together with a call to resist Hitler's exploitation of Christian faith for German renewal" (29).

Also of major significance is the inclusion in Volume 12 of the first two versions of the "The Bethel Confession" to which Bonhoeffer was a major contributor, together with an interpretive essay on the "History of the Bethel Confession" by Carsten Nicolaisen. Ironically, the final draft of this Confession had been so altered that Bonhoeffer himself refused to subscribe to it. This volume also notably includes a new translation of Bonhoeffer's 1933 "Lectures on Christology" which had earlier appeared in English translation as *Christ the Center*. The new version is based on the transcription of notes by a single student of Bonhoeffer, Gerhard Reimer, in contrast to the earlier text which had been based on a compilation of notes by different students. The centrality of the living person Jesus Christ as elaborated in these lectures remains evident in his later, more influential works, *Discipleship* and *Life Together*, as the heart of Christian community.

The translation of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works from the German critical edition is a monumental publishing achievement that forever alters the direction and scope of theological scholarship in the English-speaking world. The scholarly apparatus, introductory essays, afterward by the editors of the German edition, appendices (including detailed chronology), bibliographies, and indexes make this edition invaluable for scholars. However, the excellence of the translations of the Bonhoeffer material also makes these volumes accessible to all those interested in deepening their knowledge of the Bonhoeffer legacy. We owe a debt of gratitude to Augsburg Fortress for sustaining this project, to Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski as the General Editors, and to all the editors and translators of the individual volumes. Of all the major German theologians of the twentieth century, no one has more to teach us than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose biography and writings provide entrée to a deeper understanding of the theological and ethical issues of our times.

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The Preacher and Teacher of Preaching as *Barista*

I've been pulling lots of shots of espresso while on sabbatical. My love of espresso began when I was doing research in Milan; time spent with the barista each morning, before heading over to one of the churches and baptisteries associated with St. Ambrose, was a "sacramental" experience for me. The same can be said of time spent with preachers and presiding ministers, and ideally, those who teach them. So, thanks to support from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, I've been making espresso and intentionally reflecting on how becoming a barista informs and enlivens my work as a preacher and teacher of preaching.

The best espresso is extraordinarily sweet, has a potent aroma, and flavor similar to freshly ground coffee. The crema is dark reddish-brown and smooth, yet thick. A perfect espresso is enjoyable straight with no additives; yet bold enough to not disappear in milk. A pleasant and aromatic aftertaste lingers on the palate for several minutes after consumption. This wonderful drink is prepared and served graciously, welcomingly, and hospitably. As I reflect upon espresso, my mind immediately turns to the ways this description of espresso is a fitting metaphor for a good sermon. Simply insert "sermon" for "espresso" and "gospel" for "crema."

Like preaching, espresso preparation is an art that demands the precision and dedication of science. Whereas the preacher must understand and balance variables including the preacher and the listeners, Scripture and the context, the occasion and delivery, and the presence (or absence) of the Spirit, and the teacher of preaching must teach students to understand and balance these variables, the barista must understand and balance the blend, roast, and grind of the espresso, the distribution and tamp of the coffee in the portafiller, the quality, temperature and pressure of the water, the timeliness of the extraction and the temperature of the cup. Factor in milk for cappuccinos and lattes, and things get even more complicated. Moreover, the barista is an artist like the preacher in that "delivery" is essential to the experience. While a painter is an artist whose finished product is evidence of his or her talent, a barista with great skills, one that is a real artist, is like a preacher in that it is difficult to appreciate her or his artistry unless you can see that person at work.

As a preacher and teacher of preaching, balancing the "variables" in preaching has become second nature to me. I find that becoming a "student" of the art of making espresso helps me rediscover the complexity, uncertainty, and need for trial-and-error that my students experience. And so I find myself asking how an espresso (cappuccino, latte) is an appropriate metaphor for a sermon, how a "method" of preparing espresso informs a "method" of sermon preparation, and vice versa, and how my experience of learning to make espresso informs my teaching of preaching. I also find

that my “performance” at the coffee bar leads me to reflect on my “performance” in the pulpit, at the altar, and in the classroom. When I am out drinking coffee, I watch as a barista prepares a coffee drink and consider what it’s like to receive it, and reflect on the ways this experience informs preaching and presiding and the way I teach it. An espresso prepared and served painstakingly, inhospitably, or tentatively diminishes the taste. This is equally true for preaching, presiding, and teaching. Making espresso, preaching, presiding and teaching are all “ritual acts.”

One of the first things that occurred to me while making espresso and editing these Preaching Helps is that, at its best, preaching leaves people “tasting” the gospel. That’s different from describing the taste or telling people what they should taste or how they should respond to the taste. If people don’t “taste” the gospel, the rest really doesn’t matter—you can’t satisfy someone by describing a good cup of coffee, convince someone that she or he had a good cup of coffee, or get people to respond to a good cup of coffee when they haven’t been served one. Another thing I am learning is that a goal of making espresso is consistency. We cannot tell someone, “Sorry your coffee isn’t good. The shot I pulled last week was excellent.” Likewise, a goal of preaching is consistently—as in every sermon—giving people a taste of the gospel.

I teach that preaching is “an event in which God speaks a word of promise to God’s people as the essential core of the gospel is proclaimed.”¹ My friend Chuck Campbell suggests that preaching is “a word that enables the people of God to step into the freedom from the powers of death given through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.”² In and through preaching, God brings people from death to new life; God releases people from bondage and empowers them to step out of the tomb and live the new life exemplified and inaugurated by Jesus.³ Some argue that expecting every sermon to be an event in which God speaks a word of promise is not reasonable; this high expectation causes both preachers and congregants to go away from the sermon feeling disappointed because, for whatever reason, the Spirit did not show up. A second concern about understanding preaching as an event is the difficulty of translating the gospel into a word of promise that means something to particular people on a specific occasion. Unable to find the words and committed to preaching the gospel, preachers might reduce their proclamation of the gospel to a formula or proposition, or simply mouth traditional language. A third concern about understanding preaching as an event is that the preacher will alter, reinvent, add to, evaluate, or water down either the grace or the claim of the gospel. A fourth concern is that people may mistake the preacher’s voice for the voice of God; should this happen, the pastoral relationship, and even the congregation, might be characterized by hierarchy and distance between the preacher and the people. Yet another

1. Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 61.

2. Charles L. Campbell, “Resisting the Powers,” in Jana Childers, ed., *The Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 29.

3. For more of my thinking on the sermon as an event, see Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 61–64.

concern is that this approach to preaching may become so focused on the individual worshiper, in order to facilitate a personal encounter with Christ, that it neglects speaking to the congregation as a community of faith and relating the gospel to the world. Alternatively, people who do not feel individually addressed in the sermon may conclude that God has nothing to say to them.

And here's where making espresso is helpful. Perhaps expecting preaching to be an event is too much, though as a hearer, I certainly hope not. But if it is, maybe we can at least consistently leave people tasting the gospel—as in every sermon.

Daniel Hille and **Jennifer Phelps Ollikainen** give us a taste of the gospel in these Preaching Helps. The Rev. Jennifer Phelps Ollikainen is Associate for Worship Resources in the Worship and Liturgical Resources section of the ELCA churchwide office. Prior to this call, she served as Associate Pastor at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Springfield, Pennsylvania. She holds a Master of Divinity, Sacred Theology Master in New Testament and Doctor of Ministry in worship from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Before seminary, she was a music therapist working with people dually diagnosed with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Daniel Hille, a 2010 graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, is currently awaiting first call in the New England Synod. His approach to sermon writing is to deconstruct texts looking for themes of praxis, liturgics, humor and then waiting on the Holy Spirit to differentiate between good news and his personal thought of the week. Sometimes this strategy is more effective than others.

By the time you receive this, I will have pulled many more shots of espresso and offered further reflection on my blog (<http://craigasatterlee.blogspot.com/>). What artistic vocation helps you reflect on preaching? You might have fun finding out!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps
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Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 6, 2011

Isaiah 58:1–9a

Psalm 112:1–9

1 Corinthians 2:1–12

Matthew 5:13–20

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” This question begins the gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. Jesus follows this question with the familiar words, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Although these words are undoubtedly edifying to the listeners gathered, they might not seem to respond directly to the preceding culinary riddle regarding salt and its saltiness.

Growing up in eastern North Carolina the main use of salt was cooking. The idea of salt being on the ground would be attributed to a culinary mishap, and the thought of sprinkling salt on a highway or road would seem almost foolish as no one cooks on Highway 264 east bound through the state. However, having spent a number of years in the Midwest I’ve come to understand that there is more than one use for salt—especially in the winter. Preservation and flavor remain the primary functions of salt, where salt finds its usefulness. When salt loses this function (its saltiness) it then becomes mere grit useful for gaining traction, a task that could also be completed by using sand, cat litter, or anything “trampled under foot.” Yes, salt can be used for traction once it is no longer useful as salt, but it is intended for so much more.

To return to Jesus’ original question, how can salt get its saltiness restored? Is saltiness restored when the salt (audience)

remembers its function? Jesus does not give his audience too much time to consider this question as he begins both verses 13 and 14 with “You are” statements *umeis este*. With the second person indicative mood, Jesus is making the bold statement that those in the audience *are* the salt of the earth, and not that they *were* the useless salt now only left to be trampled. In this way Christ’s initial culinary riddle functions as a rhetorical ploy to raise the question, what does it mean to be the salt of the earth?

Mark Allan Powell identifies one of the distinct features of Matthew’s Gospel as the origin of the church. In Matthew, the church was not merely started by believers trying to figure out what had transpired on Easter; rather, Jesus began the church during his life on earth.⁴ This is semantically supported in the text, since Matthew is the only Gospel wherein *ecclesia* (church) is used outright. To continue on Powell’s train of thought, “this church is not just a social movement but an institution, with rules and procedures for defining membership and conducting business.”⁵ Therefore, a possible insight into Jesus’ question comes in v.17 when he says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

What were the rules and procedures of the early church? If we consult Isaiah, the procedures for the church are found in the Decalogue—honoring the Sabbath, not stealing, not killing, not bearing false witness against the neighbor. Isaiah’s prophecy comes to those who have ignored God’s statutes and procedures, those who, it seems, have lost their saltiness and, thus, are

4. Mark Allan Powell. *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 68.

5. *Ibid.*

destined to be trampled underfoot. Jesus' message, on the other hand, goes out to people who have hope, people who have not turned their backs on God, people who have not lost their saltiness but instead *are* the salt of the earth.

Jesus is obviously not speaking against Isaiah, or any of the prophets for that matter, but is instead initiating with his ministry the same kind of life-changing reform for which Isaiah prophesied. Jesus is bringing the hope that is also found woven into the Isaiah text. The beatitudes (which precede this Sunday's reading) can thus be read as a blessing of all those who live out the commands of the law. These are the same boundaries we see in today's Isaiah reading when the people are called to delight in the Lord, not forsake the Lord's ordinances, humbling themselves, choosing justice, sharing bread with the hungry, and clothing the naked. Both the beatitudes from last week and this week's reading from Isaiah tell us of what Powell would consider the rules and procedures of the church. These two readings show us the function (saltiness) of the early church that gathered around Jesus.

I find a great preaching point in this gospel reading when I realize that Jesus does not ask *us* how *we* have to restore our saltiness, but instead Jesus calls and empowers us as the salt of the earth. With those two words *umeis este* Jesus instills his confidence in us as his followers and his church, whom he believes in. You are the salt of the earth, you are invited into my fold, you are empowered here, you are welcomed at my table.

To return to the initial question, "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" My answer to this question comes from the words of Paul, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." It is in Christ crucified that life, purpose, hope, faith,

salvation, and even saltiness is restored and made new. DWH

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany February 13, 2011

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Psalm 119:1–8

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

Matthew 5:21–37

Paul or Apollos? Pastor Jim or Pastor Alice? Worship at 8:30 a.m. or 10:00 a.m.? Intinction or drink from the cup? Protestant or Roman Catholic? The church with the youth center or the church with the projection screens? We in the church have a way of bickering, dividing ourselves, and aligning ourselves with many different causes other than the gospel. Some of these divisions and disputes fizzle out, some resolve themselves, but other issues of adiaphora seem to take over congregations and denominations, becoming the focus of the church more so than living and proclaiming the gospel. Paul's words to the church at Corinth are therefore just as relevant to us today as they were for their original audience.

Paul writes, "Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:7). Rephrased for a modern context this might be written, "Neither the pastor who provides the mission trip to Costa Rica, nor the pastor who organizes the Youth Outreach Whitewater Canoeing Trip is anything, but only God in whose name all things are done."

What effect might it have on congregations to hear that Christ is where we find our commonality with the church universal in life and mission? What would

it mean for preachers to first preach happiness in those who seek the Lord and not advocacy work nor social agenda, nor special trips nor congregational legacy. This might offend certain Lutheran sensibilities, those who would argue that our happiness is not solely based on our ability to seek the Lord but instead that the Lord brings happiness to all, meeting them where they are. Though I will not argue this point, it is important not to overlook that the psalmist writes, “Happy are those who keep [the Lord’s] decrees, who seek him with their whole heart” (v.2). Again, we see the idea of those who seek the Lord being rewarded echoed in Deuteronomy: “Choose the Lord and his way, and you shall choose life. . . . You will be given the land that was sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

In Paul’s letters one can trace a back-and-forth between his ministry efforts, those of Peter, and even those of Apollos in the case of 1 Corinthians. However, a reader would be hard pressed to find an occurrence within either the Pauline epistles or Acts when Paul (or Peter, or Apollos) throw their hands in the air and say, “Forget it, just forget it. I’m done dealing with you. I’m going to take my people and start the First Church of Paul over here.” However, it seems, in the case of today’s reading from 1 Corinthians, that this is the path that this second-generation faith community has chosen—to divide themselves instead of being united in worship of Jesus Christ. Paul is writing to members of a church that have divided themselves on the basis of their church’s planter instead of focusing on the worship and praise of Jesus Christ, the one that binds them together.

What would it mean for all the members of the church in Corinth to “choose the Lord” together? What would it look like for the church today to put Christ

before all things? To know nothing other than Christ and him crucified? (1 Cor 2:2) What would it look like in our contexts if we truly lived as though we belong to Christ and not Paul, Apollos, the church budget, or the building we meet in? How do we put God first, before all things? What would church and ministry look like if we operated with the mindset of servants and stewards instead of CEOs and event organizers?

Living our lives with the understanding that we are all God’s servants might seem counter-intuitive to our modern understandings of ministry. Seeking the Lord sets our focus not on what building may be being built, or what new direction the church may be headed, but is instead focused on the foundational covenant of faithfulness, blessing, freedom, mercy, and new life. It is in this covenant where both Paul and Apollos are “planted.” They are planted next to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Peter, and Rebekah. It is on this foundational covenant that we stand as people who choose God, as people who seek God with our whole hearts. On this foundational covenant we as clergy and lay leaders are also planted as servants and stewards of God, teaching, leading, and exploring the holy mysteries of faith. Here we stand planted in the same promise that exists beyond time, and transcends mortality with eternal life.

As servants of God we remember that though we might “plant a church” those churches are planted in God who grows them. As servants we remember that we are stewards in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church founded on a hill at Calvary, not at the date carved into a building’s cornerstone. To put Christ first is to speak a language of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. To put Christ first is to celebrate life and mourn death while joyfully awaiting the glorious promise of the

new life in resurrection that is to come. To put Christ first is to revel in the joys of worshiping God, remembering that it is to *God's* table that we are called. DWH

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany **February 20, 2011**

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

Psalm 119:33–40

1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23

Matthew 5:38–48

As someone who preaches semi-regularly I find a constant challenge with preaching on familiar readings. I'd much prefer to preach a reading like 2 Kgs 2:23–25 (Elisha and the she bears) to a reading like the Good Samaritan or today's reading from Matthew that has the familiar words, "turn the other cheek." I believe that my apprehension is rooted in the fear that I won't be able to do anything new or creative with the reading. When we approach beloved or well-known texts I feel that we are going up against a history of sermons, Sunday school bulletin boards, and bumper stickers that have rephrased, explicated, and illustrated these texts in a million different ways, and hence our job as preachers becomes burdensome in the quest to continually find new and exciting ways to proclaim the good news from the words of such well-loved and familiar scripture passages.

I definitely felt this familiar panic after reading Matt 5:38–48. After reading the Gospel text I then read the words from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid, that foundation is Jesus Christ" (vv.10–11). After subduing my fear of

creative inadequacy by remembering that the point of the sermon is the good news of God's promises and not the wittiness of the preacher, I began to approach each of today's readings keeping in mind the prevalent themes that arise in the time after Epiphany—the manifestation and revelation of Christ.

Reading today's texts through the lectionary lenses of the time after Epiphany we can see the pericopes gearing the reader for their eventual inclusion into the promises of the Lord experienced at the Transfiguration. In the passages picked for today there appears to be a rephrasing of the law, a desire to turn to the Lord, a reminder that the Lord is the foundation in whom we are all planted, and a new approach to living. The readings for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany seem to serve as a primer before the big day, a sort of lectionary-based catechesis two weeks before the celebration of the Transfiguration.

In the reading from Leviticus we find a portion of the Holiness Code that seems to rephrase a majority of the Decalogue. Both the lectionary for today (Lev 19:1–2, 9–18) and the story of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17) begin with the common Old Testament proclamation, "I am the Lord your God," embedded in the opening line. Worth mentioning is that in the Leviticus text, all the commandments are summarized in v.18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus echoes these sentiments in Matt 7:12 in what we've come to know as the Greatest Commandment.

In the psalm we find an outright cry of the psalmist to know the desires and will of the Lord. Liturgically this is a very "come, Holy Spirit" sort of moment. "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." The word translated to "heart" in this text

is the Hebrew word *leb* that denotes the center of emotion and can be translated a number of ways including: inner person, mind, will, or heart. The *leb* is the place where many things dwell including pride, pain, idols, joy, wisdom, and the word of God.⁶ Reading the psalmist's words we can echo a desire to have the Lord appear before us and send us moving in a new direction. However, instead of the Lord appearing to turn our hearts with decrees, we wait to see Jesus radiantly appear on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah moving us as Christians into the promises made to Abraham so long ago.

Paul asks a very simple, and yet very important question in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "On whose foundation do we stand?" This question inspires reflections that reveal Jesus as Christ, Messiah, and Savior. He is the one on whom we stand. Together we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Christians of all times and ages as people gathered around, planted in, and supported by Jesus. We are part of a whole people of God through Christ Jesus. It is this revelation of Jesus as Christ—as our foundation, as the platform on which we stand before God—that is quintessential as we make our way to the glory of the Transfiguration.

Ending with the reading that brought me so much anxiety in the beginning we turn our attention to Matt 5:38–48. Where is God manifest in this text? How is Christ revealed? Isn't Christ revealed in the way that we deal with the neighbor? Loving the one who hates us seems like a tall task, but doesn't it help bring together the community? By seeking to constantly bring community together we

are constantly seeking to share the love of Christ with all people. By spreading the love of Christ to those who hate us, those we might see as unworthy, we are extending the grace of the covenant that others might have seen as being wasted on the Gentiles. *Teleios*, the word that is often translated as "perfect" twice in v.48, carries with it the connotation of something being fully developed or complete in a moral sense.⁷ This verse changes if we read it, "Be complete, therefore, as your heavenly Father is complete." As the promises of the covenant were carried throughout the world by the words and acts of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, let us continue to carry the good news of new life to the entire world. DWH

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany **February 27, 2011**

Isaiah 49:8–16a

Psalm 131

1 Corinthians 4:1–5

Matthew 6:24–34

After reading the texts for the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, I cannot help but notice the feminine images scattered throughout. Isaiah writes, in light of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and other cities in Judah, that the Lord will not forget her people. Conveying this point with motherly imagery the prophet writes, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" (v.15) In today's psalm we find a rare feminine image in v.2. Even in Matthew's Gospel we find words that illuminate God's caring and

6. William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 327.

7. *Ibid.*, 506

nurturing tendencies, then have our attention drawn to the lilies of the field and how they neither toil nor spin but instead are nurtured and grow. Throughout all these readings we find constant themes of nurturing, safety, and care.

In Isaiah, the Lord, who will not forget her nursing child, will show her child that she remembers it by calling the “prisoners out of the darkness” (v.9), feeding the hungry (v.10), and turning all mountains into roads (v.11). In this way God as mother will provide for her young by fulfilling all the promises and blessings made to her covenant people to come in “a time of favor” (vv.8–12). This passage from Isaiah is not the first use of feminine imagery in the prophet’s writings. Isa 46:3–4 is another metaphor of God using feminine imagery. Herein the Lord reminds the house of Jacob that they were birthed from the Lord’s womb and that she will remain faithful and carry her children even when Israel turns gray. The words of 46:4 “I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” are thus reinforced in chapter 48 when Isaiah stresses that Israel will not be forgotten as God [like a woman] cannot forget Israel [her nursing child].

For the psalmist, it is in the presence and wisdom of the Lord that she does not occupy herself with “things too great and too marvelous for me.” Instead the psalmist feels safe and able to calm and quiet her soul. In the presence of the Lord the psalmist invests hope not only for the present time, but also onward forevermore.

Matthew’s text, though it does not explicitly have the same feminine imagery that we find in Ps 131 and the Isaiah text, does complement the previous readings in the attitudes conveyed by the words of Christ. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what

you will wear” (v.25). This verse echoes Christ’s words in Matt 18:1–2 encouraging the disciples to have faith like a child. In Matt 18 Jesus calls the disciples to have faith like a child, and in Matt 6:27 he tells those gathered to behave as an infant. Considering the importance of Jewish history and customs in Matthew, this makes sense as the words and feminine images of Isaiah and Ps 131 would have been well-known in the community. Jesus’ comments in vv.25–29, from a Jewish perspective, would have all been acts done by God to nurture and care for her creation, like a mother eagle carrying for its young (Deut 32:11–12). Jesus reminds us to consider the lilies of the fields and how they neither toil nor spin. In Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth he reminds us that we are stewards of God’s mysteries (4:1), who have been planted in God who gives up growth (3:7).

Consider the lilies of the fields. Aren’t we lilies? Aren’t we those who have been planted in God, who are maintained and nurtured by God who cares for her children and raises her lilies? Be the metaphor lilies or children, doesn’t God provide all that we need? The dedication needed to raise delicate lilies and the dedication needed to raise an infant, though very different, do share similarities: both need to be cared for and not neglected, nurtured and fed. God does all these things, yes, she does.

What should we do with this feminine imagery? In this time after Epiphany, a time when we remember and focus on how God is revealed in the person of Jesus, these readings give us another revelation of God—God as mother. In these readings we see God the comforter, the nurturer, the protector, the matriarch of the church. I would be short-sighted to allow the notion that these are the only feminine traits or images for the divine.

This is most certainly not the case as there is an abundance of feminine imagery throughout the scripture. However, with these texts on the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany we are given a great starting point to discuss the ways that we see, understand, and interact with the feminine nature of God. With today's readings we can celebrate that God has not, and will not, forget us. We can worship in the calm and quiet of our souls, as we trust the Lord to handle things that are too great and marvelous for us.

Wrapped in our baptismal covenant we are wrapped like a babe in swaddling clothes, held tight by the one who created us, nourishes us, and helps us to grow throughout our lives, in both this time and forevermore. DWH

Transfiguration of Our Lord March 6, 2011

Exodus 24:12–18

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16–21

Matthew 17:1–9

How do we preach inclusion? How do we invite people to the promises of God and the holy mysteries of faith? How do we understand our role as Christians in the story of God's people? I believe that these questions are deeply related. Often at seminary there are tireless sermons preached around the theme of how we invite people to the table of God. While challenging congregations to be more welcoming and inclusive is worthwhile, we must still ask the question, "How do we understand ourselves as the invited and not only those who invite?" Each time I read the story of the Transfiguration I'm reminded that not only are

Christians called to extend hospitality, we are the recipients of God's hospitality and welcomed into a promise and tradition long before we were seeking new ways of including others in our congregations.

Often it is forgotten that the good news of Jesus is not that Jesus is coming to make the world Christian, but instead that Jesus brings to the world the promise and covenant of new life that God made with God's people. God made promises of land, descendants and blessings first to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) and then to David (2 Sam 7:8–16). The land promised in these covenants was that which was occupied by the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve being a number of completion, pointing to the entirety of the people of God. It was to the people of this covenant that the prophet Isaiah spoke in hopeful anticipation that an anointed one would come to the aid of the people.

In our Gospel reading today we see what could be considered a fulfillment of Is 53 and Ps 2 in a vignette reminiscent of Moses climbing Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Exod 24:12–18). Moses, who scaled the mountain with his assistant Joshua, had the Lord descend upon him for six days until the Lord called him on the seventh day. "Now the appearance of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (v.17). Similarly, Jesus ascended a mountain with his disciples Peter, James and John. Matt 17:1 begins "Six days later" referring to Jesus' "Get behind me Satan!" rebuke of Peter. If Jesus and company scaled the mountain six days after the rebuke of Peter, then this could be the author's subtle way of implicitly saying "on the seventh day." At the top of the mountain, similar to how the Lord appeared as devouring fire to the Israelites, Jesus' "face shown like the sun and his clothes become like dazzling

white” (v.2). The rich symbolism of the passage leaves it typologically ripe for a number of sermons.

Preaching baptism with this Transfiguration text, for example, would become easy as the words of God, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (v.5), echo Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:17), as well as the prophecy of the Son of the Lord in Ps 2:7. Also, on that mountain we see that Jesus was transfigured, *metemorphōthē*, this aorist passive indicative tense has Jesus as the direct object of the transformation but, in fact, not the one causing the transforming. Likewise, baptism is not something that we do, but something that God does to us. In baptism we all become sons and daughters of God, we have our sins washed away (Acts 22:16) thus becoming pure before God.

Inclusion into God’s promises also presents itself as a preaching topic as we find Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Peter, James and John standing in a circle. The inclusive tones of this message are not merely limited to the events on the mountaintop. After Moses’ experience on Mt. Sinai he took the Ten Commandments down to those who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. After the Transfiguration, at the end of Matthew, we find the great commission wherein the Abrahamic promises in which the disciples were included at the Transfiguration are to be carried to all the nations of the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Words from 2 Pet 1:16 come to mind as Peter wrote, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we told to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitness of his majesty.” This testimony of Peter identifies both his presence at the Transfiguration (i.e., being an eyewitness

to Christ in his majesty) and his tying the majesty of Jesus into the power of the Jewish tradition.

By making this connection Peter is showing that this new ministry, which he is part of, is a continuation of, and is in line with, the blessing and faith of the descendents of Abraham that were carried by such prophets as Moses and Elijah. The good news being that the “Son of the Lord” prophesied in the second psalm has come, and he has opened the covenant, originally made to Abraham and David, to all the nations of the world.

This is a life-changing concept for those of us in the church as we remember that the Christian message of inclusion, salvation, and freedom was first exercised on us. On this day we remember that Jesus extended to the disciples a promise that existed long before Simon and Andrew threw down their nets to follow him.
DWH

Ash Wednesday March 9, 2011

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Psalm 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

The juxtaposition is striking: the annual Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday speaks out against a public display of piety in the only worship service of the church year from which worshipers are sent with the visible evidence of church attendance in the form of cross-shaped smudges of ash on their foreheads.

However, Jesus’ words are not focused on this outward juxtaposition but on inward motivation. For each example of pious practice Jesus names, he centers

on the question of “why” not “how.” In the Greek, the repetition of the subordinating conjunction, *hópōs* “in order that,” in this passage in Matthew points our attention toward the purpose of these spiritual practices beyond their content or visibility. Jesus reminds his hearers that the life of faith is not about *how* we pray, give alms, fast, or otherwise live the life of faith—but *why*.

Why do we pray? Why do we fast? Why do we give alms? These pious actions and disciplines are misguided if they are performed for the sake of others’ perceptions and good judgment. Jesus knows that the good favor of our fellow human beings is a powerful motivator. Market advertising consistently plays on our desire to be esteemed by others. Honor, admiration, and respect from the human community are prized commodities. But the more we focus on the good opinions of other human beings, the more we become distracted from God’s intention for us and for the community.

Jesus reminds us that spiritual disciplines like praying, fasting and giving to the poor are activities that focus our attention on our relationship with God and the gifts of God’s grace. Rather than seeing pious activities as a means to garner respect from others, Jesus reminds us that we give alms as our participation in the mission of God in Jesus Christ and we boldly pray to call upon God’s grace for the world. Rather than fasting as an outward sign or storing wealth for earthly gain, Jesus calls us to fast as a means of bodily focus on God and trust in heaven’s abundant treasures. These activities of faith have one solitary focus even when our human motivations may be less singularly focused. Prayer, fasting and giving to the poor lead us to more fully live into God’s gift of faith, love, life and hope.

On Ash Wednesday, we wear an ash-

smudged cross not simply as an outward mark to be seen by others. Rather, the juxtaposition of the cross of mortal ash and ever-lasting promise from baptism is an inward and outward sign of the paradoxical cross of life physically present on our bodies made by God in Christ. The treasures of heaven mingle in the mark of death overcome by life. The outward sign works to reveal and deepen our understanding of the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. In addition, it becomes a public sign of that grace to the world. Our human nature leads us to worry about the perceptions of others and may lead to twinges of shame or pride upon leaving the worship space smudged with ash. But even these twinges of revelation of our sinful self-centeredness give the opportunity for us to be reminded that the identity that matters most is the treasure of being named beloved child of God. We are indeed, “marked with the cross of Christ, forever.”⁸

In 2 Corinthians, Paul urges the community to be reconciled to God allowing the treasure of grace to blossom in our lives. Again, human motivations and expectations are contrasted with the reality of the lives of those who have been reconciled to God in Christ and named beloved children of God. The paradox between human perception and God’s perception is made clear. According to human perception the faithful are treated as imposters, as the unknown, are dying, punished, sorrowful, poor, and have nothing. However, according to God, the same faithful children of God are true, intimately known, full of life, beyond the fear of death, always rejoicing, generous with the riches of grace, and possessing everything of

8. “Holy Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 231.

value. Paul's letter exhorts the community to live freely in the certain promises and joy of God's perception rather than the uncertainty, judgment, and fear that stand at the center of human perception.

Both the Gospel and 2 Corinthians urge us to get out of the sinfully seductive trap of the question, "What do people think of me?" Rather, we are led to trust in who God knows us to be—the one thing that is treasured above all else: beloved child of God. This identity as God's child turns our focus on the character of God whom the prophet Joel proclaims to be "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." (2:13) This God will not lead us toward the kind of disappointment or false hope that human expectations and shortsightedness lead toward. Rather, God leads us toward the expectation of blessing and treasure beyond imagination.

In whom is our worth, value, security, and joy revealed? How do our spiritual practices show us the grace of God, given as a gift? How does God transform our shame and pride into trust and faith? God, in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, gives us the substance and example of grace by overcoming all sin and death with the power of grace and resurrection. JPO

First Sunday in Lent March 13, 2011

Genesis 2:15–7; 3:1–7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12–19

Matthew 4:1–11

This Sunday begins a series of Sunday Gospel readings during the season of Lent

that have been used as the foundation for intense preparation of adults for baptism at the Vigil of Easter. Fittingly, this first Sunday's Gospel, Old Testament and epistle readings focus on the first commandment: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Matt 4:10, Deut 6:13).

Gen 2 sets the stage for this week's readings, reminding us that even the crafty snake, created by God, is part of the good creation. For nothing in creation is inherently bad. Rather, sin enters the story when God's creation seeks to grasp beyond what has been given for more. Although everything needed is given, the goodness and delight of the tree become beguiling enough to turn humanity in on itself. The humans in the garden were not hungry. God provided for their needs. However, what is sufficient was deemed not enough. Rather than thankful humility in relationship with God, humans suffer the consequence of self-focused over-reaching. Trust in God gave way to human self-reliance.

This is the paradox of receiving the fullness of the gifts of God. In the absence of humble thanksgiving, we look beyond the gifts that have been given and grasp for more. Because the glory of God is so close as to be reflected in our own humanity and belovedness as children of God, our vision is blurred in the splendor, mistaking what is human for what is divine. The gift of wisdom from God is easily perceived to be our own. A delightfully tended garden is easily mis-perceived as the result of human toil rather than the gift of God's creation supported by human action. A preacher feels pride for a clever sermon image without recognizing that God gives the preacher gifts for proclamation and that God is the primary actor in that proclamation. To know the gifts of God as a beloved child of God is glory itself. But in that place of grace, it is dangerously easy to be corrupted

toward vain self-glory rather than to live in humble thanksgiving, knowing the source of that glory to be God.

This is the corruption with which the accuser tempts Jesus in the wilderness. With hunger pangs, the devil tempts Jesus to provide for himself. In response, Jesus points beyond human need to God citing Deut 4:4, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In the face of the devil goading Jesus into testing the efficiency of angels, Jesus resists knowing that testing the angels reveals distrust in God citing Deut 6:16, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test." And finally, Jesus resists the lure of earthly power and authority by uttering the essence of the first commandment from Deut 6:13, "Worship the LORD your God, and serve only him." With Christ's singular and humble trust in God, the accuser vanishes and angels appear.

Jesus Christ is the model and source of our trust in God as one who lives the first commandment without fault. Jesus reveals a way of living in an attitude of humble thanksgiving and complete trust in God unencumbered by sin. Yet, we who are sinful cannot live up to this model by our own devices without erring toward delusional pride or paralyzing shame. Rather, like Jesus, we rely on the gifts God has given us to be reminded, shaped, and strengthened in our trust so that we can "fear, love, and trust God above all things."⁹

Even more, in his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that Jesus is not simply a model of trust but the very source of the faith that draws us into trusting and expecting the grace of God. The free gift of

grace overcomes sin and the law. We are not left to fend for ourselves to muster up the faith and trust in God that God demands. Rather, the death and resurrection of the one who had no sin justifies we who are sinful. The righteousness that allowed Jesus Christ to outwit and out-trust the accuser is our righteousness, our life, and our joy. In Christ, we are drawn more powerfully into God's grace, overcoming the seduction of self-reliance and self-centeredness. Because of the free gift of grace, we are free to be drawn into the freedom of humble thanksgiving, trust, hope, and joy. And God draws us into trusting faith with many manifestations of grace.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus uses the word of God, the Bible, to stay focused on God's centrality. By quoting the Torah, Jesus calls upon the faith of generations of children of God. We, too, have this gift of the word: stories, poems, and testimonies of God's grace revealed through the generations bringing to life the current reality of God's grace in our living stories today. We encounter Christ's presence in the word and in sacrament as tangible reminders of God's ever-present love and care. And we are not alone as Jesus was in the wilderness. Rather, the baptized saints of yesterday and today surround us with strength we rarely have alone, witnessing to the presence of God in good times and bad, carrying us through when our own trust and hope fails.

Following God's first commandment is as simple as living out of the humble thanksgiving as a response of knowing that everything in our human life is in God's loving hands. JPO

9. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 351.

Second Sunday in Lent March 20, 2011

Genesis 12:1–4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

John 3:1–17

The readings for the Second Sunday in Lent focus on a core question of the Christian faith, “Why Jesus Christ?” This question may be rather quickly answered with the oft-quoted John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” However, this true but formulaic answer requires exploration so that in the hearts of the faithful it becomes a confession of hope and promise in response to the question of “Why Jesus Christ?” rather than a mechanical answer.

The trouble with a theologically loaded, formulaic answer to a deep and personal question of faith is that it becomes merely words strung together without its connection to the encounter and experience of grace. Words alone do not transform a life into faith. Rather, the encounter with the living God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word, brings all things to life.

Nicodemus names this reality in his observation of Jesus in John 3:2, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” From his observation of the events in Jerusalem, Nicodemus recognizes that communion with the presence of God leads to the signs that have occurred in the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Nicodemus approaches Jesus as a detached observer rather than one who is encountering the presence of God. In the miscued exchange about

being born of the Spirit or being born from above, Nicodemus fails to see that he is actually encountering the presence of God in Jesus, the very embodiment of grace and eternal life. He misunderstands Jesus who leads him beyond observation and understanding to encounter and experience. Nicodemus allows himself to be led deeper into that encounter as Jesus reveals the things of heaven.

Jesus proclaims that to see the kingdom of God, one is born of water and Spirit, born from above. In response to further questioning by Nicodemus, Jesus reveals that he and presumably his disciples with him (the “we”) speak of what they know and what they have seen. The Greek word for “see” in verse 11 is from *hōraō*, which moves beyond observation to recognition, understanding and experience. That is, Jesus speaks of experiencing the presence of God in ways beyond simple observation or understanding. Jesus points to the fact that God’s presence is not a hidden reality, but a living, breathing reality that stands before Nicodemus revealed in words and signs. Jesus leads Nicodemus to encounter the living grace embodied in Jesus who will be lifted up on the cross and will move through death to life for the sake of all who believe. Jesus leads Nicodemus to trust the encounter, to recognize the presence of God in Jesus and to receive the living Word beyond words.

This expectant trust in the encounter with God is what propels Abram from his country and kindred to a new land. With the promise that Abram will be shown a new life, Abram simply believed and followed. Rather than considering this as faith conjured up by Abram’s obedience, Paul declares that Abram’s belief was righteousness, a gift from God. Abram trusted the gift that God gave to him, a living encounter of the presence of God.

Without question or cognitive wrangling, Abram acted out of this encounter following God into promise.

For those who have lived a lifetime of faith in the church, it is often difficult to respond to the questions and inquiries of those who are at the beginning of the journey of faith. Formulaic words that explain grace may trigger memories and experiences of encounter for those who have repeatedly experienced that encounter. However, for the one who is searching hungrily for the encounter with grace, the formulas have little meaning or significance. The community of faith does well to invite questioners and inquirers into a place of encounter and experience rather than explanation.

God draws us into these living encounters with grace. When Jesus declares that “we” know and testify to what is seen, he indicates that the presence of God is not hidden but something that can be recognized and experienced. The Gospel of John witnesses to signs, living encounters with Jesus Christ culminating in his death, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. For Christians today, we must consider how we encounter and experience the truth of John 3:16. How have we seen the sacrificial love of God revealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Responding to this question requires that we set aside rational observation skills and see with the eyes of faith that expect reconciliation, healing, love, and hope. Abram saw the promised land through his expectation of and trust in the promise of God. Nicodemus set aside his rational questions and confusion to be led into an encounter with Jesus Christ beyond his comprehension. With an attitude of expectant trust grounded in the promise of God’s continued passion for the whole world, we are led into God’s graceful vision for creation.

Perhaps the simplest response to the inquirer’s question of “Why Jesus Christ?” is to point to, lead toward, and discover together the living presence of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world. Trusting that God is present and active in the community in worship, word, sacrament, service, fellowship, and more, we know and share how we have encountered the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom 4:17) JPO

Third Sunday in Lent March 27, 2011

Exodus 17:1–7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1–11

John 4:5–42

This third Sunday in Lent focuses on that which satiates the thirst of humanity for forgiveness, continuing care, and hope: the living water offered by Jesus Christ. The story from Exodus illustrates the primary human need for water. Wandering in the wilderness, the people who were once miraculously brought out of slavery to freedom are deathly thirsty. Overwhelmed by their singular need for refreshment, they demand water. Far from whining or baseless complaining, the people’s thirst crushes the ability to ask politely, act rationally, or calmly recall God’s past salvific action. They turn with a kind of cranky hope to Moses, one who embodied God’s action in the past. Even in complaint and overwhelming bodily thirst, their demands reveal an expectant faith. That cranky faith is rewarded with an abundance of water that rushes unexpectedly from the rock.

In the familiar story of the Samaritan

woman in the Gospel of John, expectant thirst and abundant water appear again. Her encounter with Jesus Christ and living water is one of truth-telling and love. All pretenses are washed away as the woman's thirst gives her the trust to honestly name the messiness of her life. The woman's thirst for living water becomes expectation. She simply hopes for a taste of the water that may quench her thirst whether it is simply a physical thirst or one deeper in her soul.

Somehow, in the presence of Christ and with this overwhelming thirst, she is made strong enough to stand exposed and vulnerable in the presence of Jesus. This stands in contrast to her presence at the well in the heat of mid-day rather than the morning with the rest of the community. Her timing at the well reveals a reticence to be exposed with that truth within her community. She is a sinful human being who does not seem to fully comprehend the words Jesus speaks. Her thirst is her only statement of faith. Simply being thirsty in the presence of Christ releases the abundant flow of living water.

In the flow of living water, the details of the Samaritan woman's broken relationships and shamed status in the community are washed away even without being named as forgiveness or absolution. In the presence of Christ, she is simply freed to know grace in fullness and truth. In turn, that living grace overflows through her, back to the city. Her proclamation of the gospel wordlessly restores her to the community. In turn, her life becomes a place through which the living water abundantly flows.

Rather than being signs of weakness or distrust, being thirsty and expecting refreshment are powerful signs of expectant faith. Salvation is offered in the death and resurrection of Christ not because of our worthiness in the eyes of God, but because

of our belovedness. Paul notes in his letter to the Romans, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Without considering what we deserve, God offers what God desires: reconciliation, hope, and life. Poured into our hearts by God, the gift of faith is as simple as a thirst for refreshment.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than when a person is led to the waters of baptism. One is brought to the font needy and exposed but standing strong with the expectant faith that fuels our nerve to stand so vulnerable before God. As we stand at the edge of the water surrounded by the faithful community and exposed as sinners with trembling hearts at the cusp of judgment and hopeful anticipation, the saving water of grace flows toward us. We are buoyed up by the living water even before our thirst for it is quenched. Whether or not we cognitively understand what is happening or we can articulate the details of what we believe, our thirsty expectation reveals the gift of faith.

Our encounter with the water washes us clean of sin without necessarily naming every detail. This sacrament satisfies our thirst for joy even though it may be difficult to articulate at the moment. Our lives are refreshed in the moment and from then on throughout life no matter whether or not we can articulate when or how. In turn, our often inarticulate words and actions of mixed motivations provide an outlet through which the living water abundantly flows to the rest of the world.

Today's readings make it abundantly clear that God's grace, the living water, flows in the direction of thirst and anticipation rather than right behavior or comprehension. Even a complaining faith that directs its grievances toward God reveals trust in the one who gives eternal life. JPO



The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation

Programs offered through the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation at LSTC promote the practice of proportionate giving, encouraging greater spiritual growth in the sharing of all our talents and gifts. The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation generously underwrites the workshops.

Saturday, April 2, 2011
9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Preaching and Stewardship


A one-day workshop to be held in conjunction with the Northern Illinois Synod. This event will include lecture and workshops on preaching on the topic of stewardship.

Saturday, April 30, 2011
8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Spring Stewardship event hosted by LSTC and the Metropolitan Chicago Synod on the LSTC campus.

For more information and to register, go to <http://tithing.lstc.edu/> or contact Laura Wilhelm at lwilhelm@lstc.edu 773-256-0741.

The October 2009 issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* was published in partnership with the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation. It contains articles that explore the relationships of stewardship, liturgy and preaching and provides practical guidance for leaders. A single copy is available through the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation without charge. Additional copies may be purchased for \$2.50 each (includes postage and handling). Contact the LSTC Office for Advancement by e-mail at advancement@lstc.edu or call 773-256-0712.

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