

Matthew

An Interpretation Bible Commentary

MARK ALLAN POWELL

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SERIES FOREWORD

The work of biblical interpretation is ever-changing because the art of reading and understanding is profoundly shaped by the lives of interpreters and their communities. The original Interpretation series was designed to meet the needs of clergy, teachers, and students as a resource that integrates literary, historical, theological, and pastoral insights. The decision to extend and reframe that series as the Interpretation Bible Commentary reflects awareness of the vast historical, cultural, and ecclesial changes that have occurred since the last volume of the previous series was published in 2005. These new volumes reflect the major changes in interpretative strategies as well as a keen awareness of a dramatically changing contemporary context.

Prominent among the significant changes in the interpretive landscape is the expanded range of voices in biblical scholarship. Biblical interpretation has always been a diverse, vibrant undertaking, but that breadth has not been reflected in publications. The diversity of contributors in this renewed series reflects respect and appreciation for a broad array of witnesses.

The primary focus of the Interpretation Bible Commentary series remains unchanged from its predecessor: to invite its readers into the lively work of careful biblical interpretation for the purpose of faithful exposition. Preachers and teachers seeking reflective guidance from the biblical texts will find these volumes an illuminating and highly accessible resource. This Interpretation Bible Commentary series will tend to the needs of its twenty-first-century audience while maintaining the priorities of its creators. The words of the original editors—James Mays, Patrick Miller, and Paul Achtemeier—still ring true: “What is in mind is the work of an interpreter who brings theological and pastoral sensitivity to the task and creates an interpretation which does not stop short with judgments about the text but is engaged in a dialogue of seeing and hearing with it as a contemporary believer.”

Emphasizing both sound critical exegesis and strong theological sensibilities, these new volumes employ innovative approaches that allow for fresh readings of biblical texts, including difficult passages.

The series empowers readers to engage God's creation and our place in it with fresh eyes. Through their engagement with Scripture, the commentaries illumine our relationship with God, each other, and creation so that readers are propelled with new understanding and energy for fulfilling God's claims upon us in our rapidly changing global context.

Using several interpretive methodologies that are appropriate for the varying biblical texts, these volumes promise a compelling interpretation for the church and world today. Each exposition will situate the respective biblical books historically, theologically, literarily, and socially, providing a rich resource for unleashing the homiletical and formational potential of the text.

The text on which the commentary is based is the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue). Because this translation is widely available, the printing of a text in the commentary itself is unnecessary. Each commentary is divided into sections appropriate to the particular book. Instead of offering a verse-by-verse interpretation, the commentary deals with passages as a whole. Thematic topics that are especially pertinent or have great bearing on the biblical book are addressed in excursions. A "For Further Reading" section provides resources that are instructive for broadening the reader's hermeneutical horizons and diversify the reader's understanding of how to approach the text.

The writers and editors hope these volumes will explain and apply the meaning and significance of the biblical texts while addressing key contemporary issues. The Interpretation Bible Commentary series is intended to draw the reader into an interpretative community where, collegially, reader and interpreter can more fruitfully engage these ancient texts for present living.

The Editors

Introduction

Popular Christian tradition ascribes this Gospel to the tax collector named Matthew; according to this book, he became one of Jesus' twelve disciples (9:9; 10:3). Modern scholars, however, regard the book as written by an unknown Christian in an urban setting (possibly Antioch) around the year 85 CE. He was almost certainly a Jewish Christian (or perhaps better put, "a Christian Jew") who for some time had led a congregation of Jewish believers in Jesus, a community that had probably been ostracized by other Jewish groups and had experienced an influx of gentile converts. So, the Gospel was written for a community in transition and experiencing something of an identity crisis.

Further, it is widely (though not universally) believed that Matthew had two primary sources for his work: the Gospel of Mark, which he edited in accord with his interests and theology, and the early collection of Jesus' teachings that scholars call "the Q source" (cf. German, *Quelle*). In this commentary, we note the likely source for Matthew's material in italics at the beginning of each set of texts to be discussed. Sometimes we will also identify significant redactional changes that Matthew appears to have made in the material used (e.g., when he changes a story taken from Mark so that it now means something quite different). We do not dwell on such matters, however, because the primary goal of this commentary is to elucidate how Matthew's readers would be expected to understand or respond

to the narrative that we now possess. Thus, we are interpreting the text of Matthew in what is conventionally called its “finished form,” with only slight attention to the book’s compositional history. For the most part, we do not ask what material might have meant in a prior context, before it was incorporated into Matthew’s Gospel. Rather, we will look at the book as we now have it and attempt to understand it from the perspective of its implied readers or assumed audience: What are readers supposed to get out of this book? How are they expected to be affected by it and respond to it?

MATTHEW’S GOSPEL THEN AND NOW

Like all volumes in the new Interpretation Bible Commentary series, this commentary will keep two questions in the background at all times.

1. *What did Matthew’s Gospel offer its original readers?* Obviously, Matthew’s Gospel provided its original readers with a coherent account of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. But we can answer this question with greater specificity. Matthew’s readers already had the Gospel of Mark (and probably a collection of Jesus’ sayings). Apparently Matthew intended his book to replace those documents as his church’s sacred text (otherwise, we would expect him to explain or defend some of his redactional changes). So the question might be considered in terms of what Matthew’s Gospel offered its readers that the other documents did not. We will consider that question throughout the commentary, but at the outset we can state that Matthew probably found the Gospel of Mark to be inadequate in at least four ways: (a) Mark does not present Christ as currently present among his followers, and thus the locus of God’s continuing presence in the world is ambiguous. (b) Mark offers little insight with regard to the discernment of God’s will for new contexts or changing situations. (c) Mark’s portrait of discipleship does not address the possibility of progress and thus it provides little hope or incentive for improvement. And (d) Mark’s Gospel does not present the messianic movement of Jesus’ followers as a faithful (perhaps the only faithful) expression of traditional Israelite (Jewish) religion. All these points may be gathered under one umbrella observation: from Matthew’s perspective, the Gospel

of Mark contains no effective doctrine of the church. Addressing this concern may have been Matthew's major incentive for producing a replacement Gospel.

2. *What does Matthew's Gospel offer readers today?* Matthew's Gospel tells the story of Jesus, with emphasis upon his teaching and on his mission as the Son of God, who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (5:17), call sinners (9:13), build a church (16:18), and give his life as a ransom for many (20:28). This story is almost two thousand years old and is told in ways that can be mystifying (testing our knowledge of ancient Roman customs and Jewish practices) or off-putting (portraying opponents of Christianity in ways that are grossly stereotyped and unfair); it is told from a perspective that assumes we espouse beliefs and values we might not actually espouse (e.g., that demons are literally real and dangerous, or that slavery is an acceptable social institution). Still, the book offers much that allows for engagement with contemporary issues and concerns: (a) As indicated in the preceding paragraph, Matthew's Gospel is a highly significant book for developing a biblical understanding of the church—not so much as an institution, but as a movement of people who are carrying out the mission of God and manifesting the presence of God in the world. (b) Matthew's Gospel is the most important book in the Bible for Christian ethics, not only because of its emphasis on the moral teaching of Jesus but also because of its sustained hermeneutic of “binding and loosing,” by which faith communities might interpret Scripture to discern the will of God in diverse circumstances and ever-changing contexts. (c) Matthew's Gospel offers a realistic but inspiring appraisal of human potential: steering a middle path between Mark's “disciples as failures” and Luke's “disciples as heroes,” Matthew tells a story of how fallible people of “little faith” can nevertheless be the salt of the earth and light of the world. (d) Matthew's Gospel provides a compelling portrait of a world (or, at least, of a countercultural community) in which compassion and mercy are prime virtues, forgiveness and justice are top priorities, children are valued, outcasts are accepted, enemies are loved, and all people are treated with unselfish benevolence. (e) Matthew's Gospel is one of the most important texts in the Bible for Jewish-Christian dialogue—in spite of (or perhaps because of) its harsh rhetoric against the Jewish leaders who are said to have opposed Jesus. And (f) Matthew's Gospel offers one of the most devastating critiques of coercive

power and systemic injustice to be found anywhere in the Bible or, for that matter, in all of world literature.

The point might also be stated thus: Matthew's Gospel offers modern readers a paradigmatic pathway for understanding the benefits and deficits of Christianity. When Christians have gotten things wrong (Crusades, colonialism, divinely sanctioned sexism or racism, anti-Semitism), they have almost always cited Matthew's Gospel in support of their beliefs and actions. But when Christians have gotten things right (empowering the weak; protecting the vulnerable; opposing any and all forms of violence; striving for peace, justice, responsible stewardship, and radical inclusivity), they have likewise almost always cited Matthew's Gospel in support of their beliefs and actions. The book has a complicated legacy: understanding Matthew is the best way to grasp and evaluate that legacy.

READING MATTHEW

For the most part, this commentary serves as a guide for reading Matthew in a way that would be expected of its implied readers or assumed audience. At a basic level, this simply means understanding the Gospel on its own terms, as a literary work in its finished form (see Powell 2009). Still, this Gospel was written almost two thousand years ago in a world very different from our own. Some might ask, Is it possible for readers today to understand such a book the way its readers were expected to understand it? I think we can come pretty close, but I grant that for us to do so perfectly, three things would have to happen:

1. We would have to *receive* the story the way the author assumed we would receive it: out loud, in Greek, and as a continuous narrative that unfolds from beginning to end.

2. We would have to *know* everything the author assumed we would know, but no more than this. Thus, we would know the Hebrew Scriptures and many things about the Roman and Jewish worlds of the late first century, but we probably would not know other writings of the New Testament, nor doctrinal propositions from later Christianity, nor anything about the world that has come to light only as a result of scientific research or intellectual study in the years since this Gospel was written.

3. We would have to *think* the way the author assumed the book's readers would think, coming to the story with the beliefs and values expected of us, but not with beliefs or values that the author never would have anticipated his readers might espouse. So, we would accept that angels are actively involved in human affairs and sometimes guide people through dreams, but we would not believe that democracy is a preferred form of government or that capitalism is a desirable economic system.

Actually doing these three things could be arduous if not impossible, so we must use our imagination: we may need to pretend that we are hearing the story out loud from beginning to end; we may need to pretend that we know nothing about Luke's alternative Christmas narrative; we may need to pretend that we harbor a patriarchal mindset that allows (or even endorses) social inequities defined by an outmoded concept of gender.

I know this can be difficult, but we are only pretending—and this is only a first step. Eventually, of course, we will want to interpret Matthew in light of other information, and we will want to evaluate Matthew in light of our preferred and no doubt more enlightened ideologies. I trust that you will do that—and help others to do it. I make suggestions here and there along those lines, but this commentary is primarily concerned with the indispensable first step: determining how Matthew's readers would be expected to understand the Gospel. My job is to serve as your guide in this regard. I know that you are not actually hearing the Gospel read out loud in Greek from beginning to end, so I will sometimes indicate how a reader who was doing that might get something out of the text that you are likely to miss. And I will sometimes provide information about things you might not know if and when I'm pretty sure that the author assumed you would know these things. And, yes, there will be times when I try to unravel tendencies to read texts in light of modern knowledge and contemporary values rather than understanding them in light of the knowledge and values readers were assumed to possess. This last point becomes especially significant when the narrative seeks to *challenge* an anticipated value system. Jesus' words to Peter regarding forgiveness (Matt 18:22) will only be shocking to a reader who believes Peter's offer to forgive someone seven times was extraordinarily generous (18:21). Likewise, a modern reader may be inclined to think that the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–29 is assertive

or bold when she shouts after Jesus in public, but I suspect the reader is expected to regard her as obnoxious: the question then becomes, how would a reader who thinks this woman is obnoxious be affected by what follows, when Jesus praises the “obnoxious” woman for her great faith? Appreciating the narrative’s rhetorical moves demands that we (temporarily) adopt the perspective of the narrative’s implied readers or assumed audience.

A subtle but important part of reading the Gospel in this way entails recognizing that it is in fact a *story*: a narrative employing literary devices and rhetoric that are expected to guide or affect readers in particular ways. Most of the time we get this: when Matthew writes, “The disciples said . . . ,” we know that the twelve men did not all speak in unison. But sometimes a historical interest in events that lie behind this story leads readers to miss the *fictive* (fiction-like) nature of the discourse. For example, many of the characters in Matthew’s story are “flat characters,” embodying only one or two basic traits; in this way they are not like the real flesh-and-blood people on whom they might be based. The Pharisees who are characters in this story are hypocrites—and almost nothing else. In reality, it seems unlikely that all Pharisees at the time of Jesus were hypocrites, or that any of them were hypocrites all the time. Even if they were, they would have had other traits as well. But in Matthew, the character group that we identify as “the Pharisees” functions to personify a characteristic: hypocrisy essentially becomes a character in the story. As a result, if we read Matthew in order to learn about first-century Pharisees, we may be misled or disappointed; but if we read Matthew to learn about hypocrisy, we may be treated to some rewarding insights.

THEMES IN MATTHEW

Most people who use this commentary will probably turn to individual sections to see what is said about selected passages. I hope it serves such purposes well, but its utility will be increased by noting how some matters are treated throughout the Gospel in ways that transcend individual pericopes. To that end, here I summarize some of the recurrent themes developed throughout the Gospel; I have numbered them for ease of reference. In the main body of the commentary, I often refer my readers to these summaries so that they can

see how a subject in the text under discussion is featured in the Gospel as a whole. Themes specific to the passion narrative (Matt 26–27) are treated in a special section later in the commentary (see p. 281).

Theme 1. The abiding presence of God. From the virginal conception of Jesus onward, Matthew insists that “God is with us” (1:23), and numerous passages unique to this Gospel explore ways in which God’s presence is manifest in the world. These include traditional affirmations of God’s presence in the temple (23:21) and more innovative declarations of God’s presence in Jesus as well as in his followers (10:40). Matthew also assumes that while the divine presence in our world is assured (18:20; 28:20), it may assume unlikely guises so as to go unrecognized by the righteous and the wicked alike (25:31–46). We may summarize his understanding of God’s active presence in the world in terms of three propositions:

- God is present in Jesus
 - Jesus is born and, so, “God is with us” (1:23)
 - Jesus is worshiped (2:11; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17)
- Jesus is present in the church
 - with little children (18:5)
 - with people who gather in his name to pray (18:20)
 - with needy members of his spiritual family (25:37–40)
 - with those who receive bread and wine in his name (26:26–28)
 - with people who baptize, teach, and make disciples (28:19–20)
- The church is present in the world
 - as salt of the earth and light of the world (5:13–16)
 - as sheep in the midst of wolves (10:16)
 - as victorious over the gates of Hades (16:18)
 - to make disciples of all nations (28:19)

These three propositions are expressed in a single verse when Jesus says to his followers, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (10:40).

A few words of explication may fill out the points on the preceding list. First, Matthew’s affirmation that God is present in Jesus goes a shade beyond mere insistence that God *acts* through Jesus. For Matthew, the reality of God’s presence is tied to the very existence of Jesus, which is why the affirmation that “God is with us” only becomes true when Jesus physically enters the world (1:23). Of course, Matthew must believe that God has been present with

the people of Israel in the past, before Jesus was born, but the presence of God manifested now in Jesus is something unprecedented and superlative. God may have dwelt in the Jerusalem temple, but the coming of Jesus represents “something greater than the temple” (12:6). Just how far Matthew is willing to take this becomes evident when we trace the theme of worship in this Gospel: worshiping Jesus apparently counts as worshiping God (see Excursus: Worship in the Gospel of Matthew, p. 51).

Still, if Jesus were regarded only as a figure in the past, the notion that God was once present in him would have little relevance. So, Matthew goes on to emphasize that Jesus is not merely a past figure but also a lively present one who is still active. The continuing presence of Jesus is most clearly evident in the community of his followers, which Matthew calls “the church” (16:18; 18:17). Given this, we might suppose that Matthew’s answer to someone seeking the presence of God would be, “Go to the church, and there you will find the God who is present in Jesus.” But Matthew does not really expect seekers to do this. Thus, a third proposition: the church is present in the world. For Matthew, the church is not a static institution but a dynamic movement, an assembly of missionaries who go out into the world willing to suffer in order to bring good news, healing, and life (10:7–8). The world may not appreciate them, but it will be a better place because of them.

Theme 2. Reign or rule of God/heaven. Jesus frequently speaks about what the NRSVue and other English Bibles call the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven.” The two terms are synonymous though Matthew seems to prefer the latter, which avoids use of God’s name in deference to certain Jewish pieties (cf. Exod 20:7). As is well known, the Greek word *basilea* (NRSVue, “kingdom”) is a cognate noun that expresses verbal action. Almost all scholars agree that “reign” or “rule” would be a better translation because those are cognate “action nouns” in English (while “kingdom” is not). Thus the word does not refer to a place that can be located in space and time, but to the phenomenon of God’s ruling: the reign of God, or rule of heaven, is found whenever and wherever God is in charge. This is easily illustrated by considering two famous lines from the Lord’s Prayer. In English, we often pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done” (cf. 6:10), but what does it mean for God’s “kingdom” to come? Scholars recognize an instance of Hebraic parallelism here;

the same request is made in slightly different words: God's "kingdom" comes when God's will is done—or better, God's reign or rule may be seen as becoming effective whenever and wherever what God wants to happen takes place.

Still, Matthew does affirm both present and future expressions of this reality: people experience the benefits of God's rule already (12:28) even though the full consummation of that rule is still to come (6:9–10, 33; 16:28; 26:29). This theme has obvious connections to the preceding one: the reign of God (like the presence of God) is manifested through Christ's abiding presence, which is manifested in and through the church's activity in the world.

Here is a partial list of Matthew's fifty references to the reign of God or rule of heaven (in all cases, NRSVue uses the word "kingdom"):

- John the Baptist (3:2), Jesus (4:17), and the apostles (10:7) all proclaim that "the rule of heaven has come near."
- Jesus proclaims the good news of God's reign in Galilean synagogues (4:23; 9:35; see also 24:14).
- Jesus says the poor in spirit (5:3) and the persecuted (5:10) are blessed because heaven rules them.
- Jesus indicates that faithfulness to Torah will determine who is called least or great in the rule of heaven (5:19), but the scribes and Pharisees will never enter the rule of heaven (5:20; see also 23:13).
- Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Your rule come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven" (6:10).
- Jesus says to seek first the reign of God and God's righteousness, and all else will be added to you (6:33).
- Jesus says that not those who call him "Lord," but those who do the will of the Father will enter the rule of heaven (7:21).
- Jesus says that people from east and west will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when God's reign is finally manifested, while some of the "heirs" originally intended to benefit from that reign will be excluded (8:11–12; see also 21:43).
- Jesus says that John the Baptist was the greatest man ever born, but the least in the rule of heaven is greater than he (11:11).
- Jesus says his exorcisms are evidence that the reign of God has come (12:28).
- In parables, Jesus compares the rule of heaven to various types of seed (13:19, 24, 31), to yeast (13:33), to a treasure (13:45), to a valuable pearl (13:45), and to a net (13:47). See also 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1.

- Jesus says that every scribe trained for the rule of heaven knows to treasure what is new and what is old (13:52).
- Jesus promises Peter the keys of the rule of heaven so he can bind and loose on earth what will consequently be bound and loosed in heaven (16:19).
- Jesus says that some of his disciples will live to see the Son of Man coming to reign over all (16:28).
- Jesus indicates that little children and people who become as humble (insignificant) as little children are the greatest in the rule of heaven (18:1–4; see also 19:14).
- Jesus says it is harder for a rich person to enter the rule of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (19:23–24).
- The mother of James and John asks Jesus to grant her sons the two best seats in the rule of heaven (20:21).
- At the Last Supper, Jesus says he will not drink wine again until he drinks it with his disciples when they are reunited after death in the Father’s reign (26:29).

Theme 3. The mission of God. Matthew explicates God’s mission in the world as being conducted first through the earthly Jesus and then through the exalted Jesus, who abides with his followers and remains active through the community called “the church” (16:18; 18:17). There is remarkable consistency between these two phases of the mission, as may be seen by describing them in parallel columns in the accompanying table. In each case, the basic mission can be summarized in a single phrase. The primary task of Jesus was to save his people from their sins. The primary calling of the church is simply “to bear fruit,” which means to be the people who have been saved from their sins, people in whom and through whom the mission of God begun in Jesus continues to be manifested. In both cases the mission has a strong eschatological character (with emphasis on the rule of heaven and the cross), an ethical dimension, and a communal focus.

God’s Mission through Jesus	God’s Mission through the Church
To save his people from their sins (1:21)	To bear fruit (13:23; 21:43)

<p>Eschatological Character (Rule of heaven and cross)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to preach the good news of the rule of heaven (4:17, 23; 9:35) • to forgive sins (9:6; 26:28) • to plunder the house of Satan (12:29) • to die on the cross for the sake of many (20:28; 26:28) • to be raised from the dead (16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19) 	<p>Eschatological Character (Rule of heaven and cross)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to preach the good news of the rule of heaven (10:7; 24:14) • to forgive sins (6:12; 18:21–25) • to overcome the gates of Hades (16:18) • to carry the cross in self-denial (16:24) • to tell people Jesus has been raised from the dead (27:64)
<p>Ethical Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to fulfill the Law and Prophets (5:17) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – by living as a servant (20:28) – by interpreting the law with authority (5:21–48; 7:28–29) 	<p>Ethical Dimension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to do the will of God (12:49–50) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – by living as servants (20:25–26) – by binding and loosing the law with authority (16:19; 18:18)
<p>Communal Focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to build the church (16:18) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – by making disciples (4:18–22; 9:9; 10:1–4) – by calling sinners (9:9–13) – by revealing the Father (11:27) 	<p>Communal Focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to increase the church (13:23) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – by making disciples (28:19) – by seeking sinners (18:12–17) – by confessing the Son (10:32–33)

Theme 4. A positive Jewish orientation. Many passages in Matthew's Gospel display a strong orientation toward the Jewish people and affirmation of Jewish tradition:

- The Gospel begins with a genealogy that presents Jesus as the culmination of promises made to the Jews through Abraham and David (1:1–17).

- The very reason Jesus is called “Jesus” (God saves) is because “he will save *his* people from their sins” (1:21): “his people” refers at least initially and primarily to “the Jewish people.”
- Jesus’ disciples are explicitly commanded during his earthly life, “Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6; cf. 28:16–20).
- Jesus also insists that he has been “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24).
- Jesus respects Jewish institutions, paying the temple tax so as not to give offense (17:24–27) and deploring what he regards as desecrations of the temple (21:12–13).
- Jesus says that God dwells in the temple (23:21) and laments the destruction that he knows is coming upon Jerusalem (23:37–39).

Also note the emphasis on “fulfillment of prophecy” (Theme 6) and the insistence on the continuing validity of Torah (Theme 7).

Of course, this Gospel’s concern for the Jewish people and general affirmation of Jewish religion are easily overshadowed by the narrative’s extremely harsh and negative portrayal of the religious leaders of Israel (Theme 14). But Matthew’s narrative distinguishes between Jewish *leaders* and Jewish *people*: the leaders are always opposed to God, but the people as a whole never are (though they can be misled by their leaders, 27:20; 28:15). In similar fashion, gentile *rulers* (like Herod and Pilate) are invariably opposed to Jesus, but gentiles in general (despite their many failings; see Theme 5) are not. In this Gospel it is the possession and use of worldly power rather than ethnicity that sets people in opposition to God (see Theme 16).

Theme 5. Condescending acceptance of gentiles. Matthew’s Gospel concludes somewhat triumphantly with a commission to make disciples of gentiles (“all nations,” 28:16–20). This will not come as a total shock to the reader because Jesus has already been impressed by the faith of individual gentiles (8:5–13; 15:21–28), and the gentile magi in the birth narrative have prefigured the manner in which pagans from many nations will come to worship “the king of the Jews” (2:1–12). Jesus has spoken of the good news of the rule of heaven being “proclaimed throughout the world” (24:14) and suggested that people from many nations (probably gentiles) will participate in the reign of God when some of those for whom it was intended (probably Jews) are shut out (8:11–12; 21:43; see also 22:8–9).

All this, however, seems to come with an attitude of condescension, a recognition that certain *atypical gentiles* will be counted

worthy even though, generally speaking, gentiles are not the sort of folk with whom godly people would want to associate. Indeed, Jesus' words in Matthew often suggest that he doesn't think highly of gentiles:

- Jesus tells his disciples, "If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?" (5:47).
- Jesus tells his disciples, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (6:7).
- Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . For it is the gentiles who seek all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (6:25–32).
- Jesus sends his disciples out on a healing mission, telling them, "Do not take a road leading to the gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5–6).
- Jesus warns his disciples, "You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the gentiles" (10:18). Here "gentiles" are cited as one example of "wolves" into whose midst Jesus' disciples are sent as "sheep" (10:16).
- Jesus concludes his instructions to the disciples on how to deal with unrepentant sinners by saying, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector" (18:17).
- Jesus tells his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you" (20:25–26).

In many of these passages, notably, the word "gentiles" is used in parallel structure to "tax collectors" (5:46–47; 18:17), "hypocrites" (6:5–7), or "Samaritan[s]" (10:5–6). In broad terms, gentiles are associated with vanity, tyranny, and sin. Even their best behavior is self-serving. God does not want to hear their long-winded prayers or heal their diseases. Nevertheless, *some* gentiles exhibit faith and the potential to be made disciples of Jesus. I am only slightly embarrassed to report a comment I once made at a meeting that has been widely quoted by others who found it poignant: "Matthew may want to baptize gentiles and teach them to obey Jesus, but he wouldn't want his daughter to marry one."

Theme 6. Fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew's Gospel includes twelve "fulfillment citations," passages claiming that what is reported serves to fulfill sayings of biblical prophets:

- a virgin giving birth to a son called "Emmanuel" (1:22–23)
- birth of a shepherd king for Israel in Bethlehem (2:5–6)
- God's son being called out of Egypt (2:15)
- mourning the children of Rachel in Ramah (2:17–18)
- Jesus being called a "Nazarene" (2:23)
- people in Galilee (Zebulun/Naphtali) seeing a great light (4:14–16)
- Jesus taking infirmities and bearing away diseases (8:17)
- Jesus commending silence after curing many people (12:17–21)
- people not understanding the esoteric teaching of parables (13:14–15)
- Jesus speaking in parables to proclaim hidden truth (13:35)
- Jesus entering Jerusalem mounted on a donkey's colt (21:5)
- thirty pieces of silver being used to buy a potter's field (27:9–10)

The fact that there are twelve such occurrences is often thought to be significant, since the number twelve can be symbolic of Israel (12 tribes). Scholars sometimes struggle to explain Matthew's precise construal of these prophecies: the citation in 2:5–6 appears to add words to the text of Micah 5:2, and the passage presumably quoted in 2:23 cannot be found. Other anomalies occur, and it is not certain whether Matthew quotes from the LXX, offers his own translation of the Hebrew text, or simply relies upon his (somewhat faulty) memory.

Many more passages in Matthew could be understood in the manner of those above even though no explicit "fulfillment citation" is offered (e.g., the dividing of garments in 27:35 recalls Ps. 22:18, though Matthew does not call attention to this). Matthew's narrative also seems filled with subtle but sweeping allusions to biblical stories (e.g., a character named Joseph who is guided by God through dreams; cf. 1:20–2:20 with Gen 37–50). And Matthew is often seen as developing his Christology on a variety of Old Testament models, especially that of Moses (see Theme 10) and the Isaian Servant (cf. 12:18–21 with Isa 42:1–4; note the frequent allusions to Isa 53 in the passion narrative).

Basically, the Matthean Jesus claims that he has come to fulfill the Scriptures ("the Law [and] the Prophets," 5:17), and Matthew appears to regard his entire life as previewed or predicted in the Scriptures:

- conception (1:22–23)
- birth (2:4–6)
- upbringing (2:23)
- ministry (12:17–21)
- passion (26:54)

Theologically, this indicates that everything is going in accord with God’s plan, a plan worked out long ago: there have been no unexpected developments, and nothing has been left to chance. At another level, many scholars believe that Matthew presents Jesus as fulfilling prophecies in hopes of converting Jews who see that their Scriptures clearly point to him. I personally think that is unlikely. For one thing, no discerning Jew would be inclined to believe that Jesus actually said or did these things just because Christians say he did. More likely, Matthew wants to show gentile converts that the Jewish Scriptures have relevance for anyone who believes in Jesus. In other words, his aim is not to persuade those who accept the Scriptures to believe in Jesus, but to get those who believe in Jesus to accept the Scriptures.

Theme 7. Continuing validity of Jewish law. The Matthean Jesus insists that “until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law” (5:18). By “law,” he means the Jewish law, or Torah, inscribed in the Jewish Scriptures (what Christians usually call the Old Testament). Paul and other New Testament writers indicate that many parts of this law no longer apply to those who are “in Christ” (e.g., required circumcision, dietary laws, purity codes, prescribed fasts and sacrifices, Sabbath practices, and other ritual observances). Matthew appears to have rejected that notion:

- Matthew omits Mark’s interpretive comment that Jesus “declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19; cf. Matt 15:17).
- Matthew also adds a comment that Christians undergoing tribulation should pray that they will not have to flee “on a Sabbath” (Matt 24:20; cf. Mark 13:18).

Apparently, as far as Matthew is concerned, dietary and Sabbath laws are still in effect, as much for Christians as for Jews. We may suppose that this position would have put Matthew at odds with other Christian leaders, and there are hints that this may be the case:

- Some people who call Jesus “Lord” will actually be excluded from the rule of heaven on account of behaving lawlessly (7:21–23).
- Others (perhaps including the apostle Paul) will simply be called least in the rule of heaven for obtusely relaxing what they thought were insignificant commandments and teaching others to do so as well (5:17).

These ideals, however, must be considered alongside the numerous instances in Matthew that appear to show Jesus setting aside what Moses or other traditional exponents of the law have said (e.g., 5:21–48). From Matthew’s own perspective, there would be no discrepancy: Jesus never actually abolishes or sets aside the law; he simply practices the necessary interpretive task of binding and loosing it (see Theme 8). That principle would potentially allow for Matthean ethics to be in line with (or even more progressive than) other Christian voices, but for the author of this Gospel, such a possibility may have remained hypothetical.

Theme 8. Binding-and-loosing commandments. Both times that Jesus refers to “the church” in Matthew’s Gospel, he tells those who will constitute the church, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:19, sg. “you”; 18:18, pl. “you”). Throughout history Christian interpreters who did not know Jewish literature proposed various interpretations of these passages (often taking them as parallel to John 20:23), but it is now widely recognized that the terms *bind* and *loose* were used in rabbinic interpretations of the law to designate whether or not a specific scriptural admonition was applicable for a given circumstance. For example, some rabbis might insist that the law forbidding work on the Sabbath was binding with regard to travel on the Sabbath, since travel is a form of work. By the same token, they might also decide that this law should be loosed with regard to certain types of travel or with regard to travel for certain purposes. Such discussions were widespread within Pharisaic Judaism around the time Matthew’s Gospel was written (and today many examples can be found in the Talmud, where decisions from a later time were recorded regarding application of Torah to aspects of daily life).

Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus acts like a rabbi, declaring whether or not laws should be bound or loosed:

- *bound*: the commandment forbidding adultery *applies* to lustful thoughts (5:28).
- *loosed*: the law forbidding work on the Sabbath *does not apply* to healing the sick on that day (12:12).

Matthew's Gospel invariably presents Jesus as the good example of one who binds and looses the law in accord with God's will.

By the same token, the Pharisees are made to serve as bad examples of people who invariably get it wrong:

- *bound*: laws that prohibit harvesting a field on the Sabbath are extended to forbid people picking a few grains of wheat to satisfy their immediate hunger (12:1–2).
- *loosed*: requirements to care for elderly parents can be ignored if the money is given to God (religious institutions) instead (15:3–9).

Thus, the scribes and Pharisees bind what should be loosed and loose what should be bound: when they do the former, they are said to “have condemned the guiltless” (12:7); when they do the latter, they are said to “nullify the word of God” (15:6).

Many observations and implications follow:

- Understanding this practice of binding and loosing explains apparent discontinuities in Jesus' attitude toward the law (see Theme 7): Jesus says that the entire Jewish law remains in full force (5:17–19), but sometimes he seems to set legal prescriptions aside (5:38–39). In the latter instances, he is not abolishing the law but fulfilling it through an interpretation that brings out its true intent (5:17).
- Jesus binds laws more often than he looses them, demanding that his followers adopt standards of righteousness that exceed those of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). Still, Matthew claims that Jesus' stricter interpretations of the law constitute a paradoxically light burden compared to the heavy burdens laid on people by the Pharisees' misguided judgments (11:28–30; 23:4).
- Although the instances in which Jesus looses the law are relatively few, his justifications for doing so set sweeping precedents, with potentially radical implications:
 - “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (12:12).
 - “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person” (15:11).
- Matthew presents Jesus as explicitly extending his authority to bind and loose commandments to Peter and the other disciples (16:19;

18:18). When Jesus promises that what the church binds and looses on earth will be bound and loosed in heaven, the clear implication is that God will hold people accountable for following the ethical decisions of the church.

- This ecclesial authority is grounded in Matthew's eschatological and christological propositions. Eschatologically, he believes that the rule of heaven has come near (4:17), that God's reign is in the process of being established so that God's will can now be discerned and followed in ways not previously possible. Christologically, he believes that Jesus, the Son of God, who previously manifested God's presence in his bodily form on earth, now continues to manifest that divine presence (and authority) through the community of his followers.

In short, Matthew suggests that ethical discernment is not simply a matter of "doing what the Bible says" but rather of arriving at a communal understanding of Scripture's relevance to specific situations in specific contexts. The Matthean Jesus, furthermore, articulates several principles that should guide the church in making such deliberations:

- The Golden Rule: doing the will of God always aligns with treating others the way one wants to be treated oneself (7:12).
- The double love commandment: doing the will of God always involves doing what expresses love for God and love for neighbor (22:34–40).
- Divine preference: doing the will of God always recognizes that God prefers mercy to sacrifice (9:13; 12:7; see Hos 6:6).
- Weightier matters of the law: doing the will of God always recognizes that concern for justice, mercy, and faith takes precedence over many other matters.

This theme of binding-and-loosing commandments is not only important for understanding much of Matthew's Gospel; it also is one of the most significant contributions that Matthew's Gospel has made to the Christian religion and to all cultures influenced by Christian thinking. In a sense, the entire field of Christian ethics owes its existence to this simple insight from Matthew's Gospel: doing the will of God requires discerning the contemporary relevance of biblical mandates in light of contextual considerations and hermeneutical priorities.

For a more comprehensive discussion of this theme, see Powell 2003.

Theme 9. Jesus as the Son of God. Matthew's Gospel places special emphasis on the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.

- God speaks twice from heaven (at Jesus' baptism and at his transfiguration), and both times God calls Jesus "my Son" (3:17; 17:5; see also 2:15).
- The story of the virgin birth presents Jesus as God's Son in an almost literal sense (1:18).
- The disciples worship Jesus as the Son of God (Matt 14:32–33; in contrast to Mark 6:51–52).
- Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi says that Jesus is not only "the Messiah" (Mark 8:29) but also "the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16).
- In Jesus' blessing upon Peter, we see how the confession that Jesus is the Son of God seems to be closely connected to the foundation of the church, the overcoming of Hades, the reception of the keys to the rule of heaven, and the binding and loosing on earth of what will consequently be bound and loosed in heaven (16:17–19).
- Jesus' identity as God's Son in Matthew is closely linked to the story of his crucifixion:
 - In one of his parables, Jesus hints that the reason his enemies want to kill him is because he is the Son of God (21:33–46).
 - He is later sentenced to death for claiming to be God's Son (26:63–66).
 - On the cross, he is mocked by opponents who claim that such a fate proves he is not the Son of God (27:40, 43).
 - Ironically, the manner of his death leads others to confess that he is indeed "God's Son" (27:54).

Theme 10. Jesus as the new Moses. Matthew's strong emphasis on the law (see Theme 7) and on the teaching of Jesus is seen as compatible with a presentation of Jesus as a new or second Moses (Deut 18:15). Here are just a few of the more striking similarities to support such a presentation:

- The infant Jesus is saved from a baby-killing monarch, just as the infant Moses was saved from the baby-killing Pharaoh (2:13–18; cf. Exod 1:22–2:10).

- Jesus (with his family) flees from Israel to Egypt and then returns, just as Moses fled from Egypt to Midian and then returned (Matt 2:13–21; cf. Exod 2:15; 7:6–7).
- Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights, just as Moses did (Matt 4:2; Exod 34:28).
- Jesus goes up on a mountain to deliver his new Torah, just as Moses went up a mountain to receive the original Torah from God (Matt 5:1; Exod 19:3).
- Jesus miraculously feeds people with bread in a deserted place, just as Moses called upon God to feed people with manna in the wilderness (14:13–22; 15:29–39; cf. Exod 16).
- Through blood, Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant just as, through blood, Moses was the mediator of the old covenant (Matt 26:28; Exod 24:8).
- Jesus commissions his disciples to go to all nations and teach observance of his commandments, promising them his abiding presence, just as in the days following Moses’s death God commissioned Joshua to go into a foreign land and observe all the commandments, promising him God’s abiding presence (Matt 28:16–20; Josh 1:1–9).

Scholars have noted other parallels or allusions as well, some of which are drawn more closely to Jewish traditions regarding Moses than to what is found in the Scriptures themselves (for instance, some noncanonical Jewish writings report momentous occurrences at the death of Moses—lightning flashing, the heavens or earth being shaken, angels appearing, and so forth; cf. Matt 27:51–53; 28:2–3). Dale Allison says that, like Moses, Jesus is many things to God’s people: leader and king, savior and deliverer, teacher and revealer, intercessor and suffering prophet (Allison 1993). Most important of all, perhaps, many interpreters still accept Benjamin Bacon’s century-old suggestion that Matthew organizes the teaching of Jesus into five great speeches in a deliberate attempt to provide the church with a new Pentateuch (Bacon 1930). The five “books of Jesus” that mimic the original “five books of Moses” are these:

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| • Chapters 5–7 | The Sermon on the Mount |
| • Chapter 10 | The Missionary Discourse |
| • Chapter 13 | The Parables of the Kingdom |
| • Chapter 18 | The Community Discourse |
| • Chapters 24–25 | The Eschatological Discourse |

Theme 11. Disciples as people of little faith. Five times in this Gospel, Jesus describes his disciples as people who have only a little faith:

- Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about what they will wear. “Consider the lilies of the field,” he says. “If God so clothes the grass of the field, . . . will [God] not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (6:28–30; cf. Luke 12:27–28).
- Jesus is with his disciples in a boat when a storm comes up at sea. They are terrified. He asks them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” (8:26).
- When Peter tries to walk on the water, he is afraid and begins to sink. He calls out for help, and Jesus grabs him. Lifting him up, Jesus asks, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (14:31).
- One day, after miraculously feeding the multitudes, Jesus is teaching his disciples and uses the metaphor of “yeast.” They misunderstand the expression and think he is concerned about whether they will have enough real yeast to make bread when they need it. He asks, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?” (16:8).
- When Jesus’ disciples ask him why they are unable to drive a demon out of a possessed child, he tells them that it is “because of your little faith” (17:20).

In Greek, the expression for “little faith” is a single word, *oligopistoi*, which serves almost as a nickname bestowed upon the disciples by the Matthean Jesus (like “Sons of Thunder” for two of them in Mark 3:17). Thus, his disciples are almost *definitively* people of little faith. By contrast, Matthew’s narrative mentions two persons who have “great faith”—a gentile centurion (8:10) and a Canaanite woman (15:28)—but Jesus does not call either of these to become his disciples or commission them for ministry as his followers in the world. We may wonder why the mission of God (see Theme 3) is entrusted to people of little faith when people of greater faith are clearly available.

The simplest answer may be that the disciples are uniquely qualified for mission because they are given “understanding” by Jesus, and understanding is a more important quality than faith for the mission to which they are called (see Excursus: “Understanding” and Divine Revelation in Matthew, p. 158). But this observation begs a slightly different question: why does Jesus choose to give such understanding to people of little faith? As it turns out, a lack of faith can be

unfortunate, but it is not a devastating fault. Jesus tells his disciples that only the tiniest speck of faith (“the size of a mustard seed”) is necessary to accomplish the impossible (17:20). Likewise, Matthew’s Gospel twice describes the disciples of Jesus as doubting (14:31; 28:17), though both of these passages occur in contexts in which they are also said to worship him (14:33; 28:17). So, people with little faith can work miracles, and people who doubt can worship: these concepts are not incompatible or antithetical for Matthew, and we should probably assume that they inform his vision of the church. In this Gospel, Jesus insists that he has not come to call the righteous but sinners (9:13), so it should not be surprising if his followers are inadequate people who often fail at fulfilling even their best intentions (26:41), people who need to be forgiven repeatedly and who, in turn, need to forgive others repeatedly as well (18:21–35). Indeed, the Great Commission in 28:16–20 is explicitly given to apostates (26:31, 56, 69–75), and the task of making disciples of all nations is entrusted to worshiping doubters (28:17), whom Jesus regards as people of little faith.

Theme 12. Prominence of Peter. The disciple Peter has a more active role in Matthew than in any of the other Gospels, being mentioned by name in numerous narrative episodes:

- Peter and his brother are called to follow Jesus and become “fishers of people” (4:18–19).
- Peter attempts to walk on water, with partial success (14:28–33).
- Peter asks Jesus to explain his teaching on true defilement (15:15).
- Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God (16:18).
- Jesus identifies Peter as the rock on which he will build his church, giving to Peter the keys to the rule of heaven, i.e., the authority to bind and loose commandments (16:17–19).
- Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he is going to be crucified, earning Jesus’ stinging rebuttal, “Get behind me, Satan!” (16:22–23).
- Peter sees Jesus transfigured on a mountain and offers to build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (17:1–8).
- Peter rashly tells inquisitors that Jesus pays the temple tax, then is sent by Jesus to catch a fish with a coin in its mouth to make good on that pledge (17:24–27).
- Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a sibling, suggesting a policy of seven times (18:21–22).

- Peter calls Jesus' attention to how much he and the others have given up, asking, "What then will we have?" (19:27).
- Peter says he will never desert Jesus (26:31–33) or deny him (26:34–35).
- Peter goes with Jesus to Gethsemane and falls asleep when told to stay awake and pray (26:40–45).
- Peter follows Jesus when he is arrested, but then denies three times that he is an associate of Jesus (26:58, 69–73).

Obviously, Peter is also included in dozens of other texts that refer to "the disciples," but these are ones that mention him by name (also 10:2). In several cases, the reference is unique to Matthew (14:28–33; 15:15; 16:17–19; 17:24–27; 18:21–22). If Matthew's Gospel was written in Antioch, as many suspect, then it was composed in a community in which Peter played a significant though controversial role some fifty years previous (Gal 2:11–14).

Theme 13. A community called "the church." Matthew's Gospel is the only one of the four to display Jesus talking explicitly about the "church," which is to continue after he is gone. He tells Peter, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (16:18). In another remarkable passage, he speaks of the church as though it already exists during his ministry, outlining a process by which disciples who have complaints against each other may bring their disputes to the church for resolution (18:15–18). Thus, according to Matthew's Gospel, the church did not simply come into being after Easter as followers of Jesus struggled to understand what had transpired. Matthew portrays Jesus as starting the church during his life on earth. This church, furthermore, possesses some level of organization, with rules and procedures for defining membership and conducting business.

Matthew's understanding of the church can be presented in the following propositions:

- The church is instituted by Jesus and sustained by his authority.
 - Jesus is the one who "builds" the church (16:18): establishing the church is part of his mission on earth.
 - Jesus grounds his "Great Commission" to the disciples on the fact that he has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (28:18).
 - Jesus also says that the church will have divine authority to "bind and loose" on earth what will consequently be bound and loosed in heaven (18:18; cf. 16:19).

- The definitive characteristic of the church is that it embodies and manifests the continuing presence of Jesus on earth.
 - Jesus promises that he will be present wherever two or three gather in his name (18:20) and be with his followers to the end of the age (28:20).
 - Special attention is given throughout the Gospel to characters said to be “with Jesus” (his mother, 2:11; outcasts, 9:11; a follower, 26:51; disciples, 16:21; 20:17–19; 26:37–38, 40, 69, 71). This is significant, since Jesus says in 12:30, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (see also 12:14; 26:59; 27:1).
- The church is more like a missionary movement than a localized institution (like a synagogue or temple).
 - Jesus depicts the church as overcoming “the gates of Hades” (16:18), suggesting that it is more like an army than a fortress (gates don’t attack; they get attacked).
 - Jesus commissions his disciples to *go*—moving out into the world to make disciples (28:19).
- The church is a moral community, committed to keeping God’s commandments as interpreted by Jesus:
 - The notion of the church being built on a rock (16:18) recalls the parable of Two Builders, in which the house built on a rock represents those who hear and do Jesus’ words (7:24–25).
 - People are made disciples and become part of the church by being taught to obey the commandments of Jesus (28:18–19).
 - Community members hold each other accountable for their moral behavior, calling those who sin to repentance (18:15–18).
- The church is portrayed as the family of God:
 - Jesus, the Son of God, designates his disciples as his true family and says that whoever does the will of God is his “brother and sister and mother” (12:46–50). He also says that whatever is done to any member of his family is done to him (25:40).
 - Followers of Jesus are called “children of God” (5:9, 45; 13:38; 23:9) and “siblings” (my trans.; 18:15, 21, 35; 25:40).
- The church is an egalitarian and inclusive community.
 - Church members include people from all nations (28:18), from east and west (8:11), and from the whole world (24:14).
 - No one in the church will be regarded as “Teacher” or “Father” because all are disciples of Christ and children of God (23:8–10).
 - The church will regard the greatest in the community as those who serve (20:26–27; 23:11), will view little children as its most important members and role models (18:1–5; 19:14), and will

- always remember that Jesus willed for his church to be founded by women (28:1–10; see comments on this text).
- The church is typified by limited faith and by understanding that is given by Jesus:
 - The disciples of Jesus are presented as people of “little faith” (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20), but Jesus makes clear that this is sufficient (17:20) (see Theme 11).
 - The disciples are presented as people who “understand” Jesus (13:51; 16:12), but typically this is only after they have been given understanding by Jesus (see Excursus: “Understanding” and Divine Revelation in Matthew, p. 158).
 - The church may be characterized by paradoxically ideal combinations of responses.
 - Fear and great joy (28:8)—joy is what turns fear into worship; fear is what prevents joy from being shallow (see comments on this verse).
 - Worship and doubt (28:17; see also 14:31–33); worship turns doubt into faith; doubt is what keeps worship from becoming self-assured and superficial (see comments on these passages).
 - The church is a community that practices constant and limitless forgiveness.
 - Jesus’ followers are all sinners, who relate to him as the sick to a physician (9:12–13).
 - Members of the community pray regularly to be forgiven their sins and commit themselves to forgiving the sins of others (5:23–24; 6:14–15; 18:21–35).
 - The communal meal the church observes involves drinking wine, which reminds them of the blood of Jesus poured out for the forgiveness of sins (26:28).

Theme 14. Religious leaders as enemies of God. In Matthew’s Gospel, the religious leaders of Israel constitute a “character group”: the Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, elders, and scribes all evince the same point of view, share the same character traits, and play the same role in the plot. They form a “united front” in opposition to Jesus; while Matthew occasionally recognizes historical differences between them (15:1–2; 22:23), they are essentially treated as a single character. The characterization of them, furthermore, is relentlessly harsh.

Both Jesus and Matthew (as narrator) describe them as “evil” (*ponēros*):

- Jesus to scribes: “Why do you think evil in your hearts?” (9:4).
- Jesus to Pharisees: “Brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?” (12:34).
- Jesus to scribes and Pharisees (twice): “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it” (12:39; 16:4).
- Jesus to scribes and Pharisees: “So shall it be with this evil generation” (12:45).
- When the Pharisees try to trap Jesus, he is “aware of their evil” (22:18; NRSVue, “malice”; Gk., *ponēros*).

Literary critics usually identify this as the “root” or defining characteristic of the religious leaders in Matthew’s story: they not only think what is evil, speak what is evil, and do what is evil: they *are* evil (just like Satan, “the evil one,” 13:19, 38–39):

- The epithets “brood of vipers” (3:7; 12:34; 23:33) and “child of hell” (23:15) identify them as offspring or children of Satan (as opposed to being “children of God”).
- Jesus tells his disciples that the Pharisees are plants “that the heavenly Father did not plant” (15:13), identifying them as the weeds mentioned in a previous parable (13:24–30); these weeds, he says, “are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil” (13:38–39).

The religious leaders also evince two other traits, which might be regarded as consequences of being evil:

- Hypocrisy (6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). In Matthew, “hypocrisy” refers to the quality of *deception*: presenting oneself to be something other than what one truly is.
- Blindness (15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26). When used metaphorically, blindness in Matthew refers to the quality of *self-deception*: believing oneself to be something other than what one truly is.

Thus, the religious leaders are evil, but they present themselves to others as righteous (this makes them hypocrites), and they have come to believe themselves to be righteous (this makes them “blind”). For Matthew, self-deception is not an excuse for their behavior (as it is in Luke 22:34; cf. Acts 3:17), but a consequence of divine judgment: they are not *allowed* to see the truth (about themselves, Jesus, or anything else) because they are evil.

There are no exceptions in Matthew to his portrayal of the religious leaders of Israel as enemies of God:

- A friendly scribe who agrees with Jesus in Mark 12:28–34 is transformed into an enemy who tests Jesus in Matthew 22:34–40.
- Jairus, who is called “one of the leaders of the synagogue” in Mark 5:22, becomes simply a “leader” in Matthew 9:18.
- Joseph of Arimathea, who is called “a respected member of the council” in Mark 15:43, becomes “a rich man” in Matthew 27:57.

The redaction is consistent: individuals who are presented favorably cannot be included among the character group of the “religious leaders of Israel” in Matthew’s story.

In Matthew’s story, as indicated, these religious leaders are not just opponents of Jesus but also enemies of God. Matthew’s readers are not expected to think they are opposed to Jesus because they misunderstand him or fail to identify him for who he is. Rather, they are opposed to him precisely because he *is* God’s Son and they have rebelled against God (21:33–45). Of course, they do not realize this themselves: their self-deception prevents them from seeing the depths of their own depravity. This becomes evident in the climactic events of Jesus’ passion:

- They pay “blood money” for Jesus’ betrayal (26:14–16; 27:3–6).
- They suborn false testimony against Jesus (26:59–62).
- They seek to cover up the truth when they apparently know that God has raised Jesus from the dead (28:11–15).

In all these instances, they somehow continue to view themselves as being “in the right” even when they are doing what they themselves would regard as wrong.

But Jesus is aware of their true nature:

- He uses them as the paradigmatic example of people who will never enter the rule of heaven (5:20).
- He tells them that the reign of God will be taken away from them and given to a people for whom that reign may prove more fruitful (21:43; cf. 8:12).
- The last thing he ever says regarding them is that they will not escape being condemned to hell (23:33; cf. his final words regarding the religious leaders of Israel in Luke 23:34).

Most telling, perhaps, is that while Jesus condemns the religious leaders to their face, denounces them to his disciples, and warns the crowds about them, he never once makes any attempt to minister to them or to suggest that they might change their ways or behave differently. He does not call them to repentance, any more than he would try to reform the demons he exorcizes (contrast Luke 10:28, 37; 11:41; 14:14). In one terribly revealing passage, he counsels his disciples to “leave them alone” (Matt 15:14). Their situation is hopeless, their condemnation is assured, and that is all that needs to be said about them (or to them).

In considering such a portrayal, we need to remember that Matthew’s Gospel is a story and that these religious leaders are characters in that story. In literary terms, the religious leaders are “flat characters,” and the literary function of flat characters is never to present a realistic depiction of people who exist (or once existed) in the world outside the story. The literary function of flat characters is to provide personification of values. Stories that employ flat characters typically do so to comment on the values that those characters are made to embody. In this case, Matthew’s readers are expected to recognize that what the religious leaders do in this story is what *evil* does: evil condemns the guiltless (12:7), blasphemes the Holy Spirit (12:31), neglects the weightier matters of the law (23:23), and so on. The religious leaders of Israel represent evil in this story; even if we question the Gospel author’s choice of telling the story in such a way, we can still recognize how the story is expected to affect its readers. Matthew’s implied readers would not be expected to draw historical conclusions regarding any people who inhabit (or once inhabited) the world outside this story. Rather, Matthew’s readers would be expected to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of evil: it tends to be hypocritical, masquerading as good (23:27–28); it involves unwitting self-deception, failing to recognize its own duplicity (15:14; 23:16–22); it perverts what would be good, ignoring motives or outcomes (6:2, 5, 16), and so on. Finally, in the ironic resolution of the passion narrative, the reader learns something else about evil: God triumphs over evil, even when evil succeeds at doing its worst (see Theme 15).

It is a sad fact of history that Matthew’s Gospel came to be interpreted in ways that support anti-Semitism; his portrayal of the

religious leaders of Israel certainly contributed to that. Some scholars have speculated that his harsh characterization was driven by poor relations with non-Christian Jewish people in his own day, by animosity toward “the synagogue down the street.” There is no way to know whether that was the case, but I suspect that, for the most part, Matthew just wanted to tell an apocalyptic tale of good versus evil, and in order for that to work, someone in the story had to represent evil. That said, I have no interest in letting this author “off the hook” for telling the story the way he did. At the very least, it was incredibly insensitive of him to use actual historical people (ones with whom he would have had differences) as symbols of demonic evil in his fictive tale. The result is a story that (whatever the author’s intentions) lends itself easily to anti-Semitic interpretation. Given that, this is nevertheless the story we have, and I think it is possible to do two things: (1) Engage the story on its own terms, and discern what readers are expected to get out of it: nothing to do with anti-Semitism, but a message that, in spite of the mode of presentation, can be profound, provocative, and potentially transforming. (2) Critique the author’s unfortunate decision to tell the story the way he did. In this commentary, we focus on the first step, but I do believe the second is appropriate and absolutely necessary, so we will not ignore it altogether.

Theme 15. Conflict along three plot lines. The basic plot of Matthew’s Gospel is driven by conflict: two of the principal story lines involve conflict between Jesus and his own disciples and the much more serious conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. In the background, however, the reader senses conflict at another level, one not narrated in the story as such but always just below the surface. This is the apocalyptic conflict between God and Satan: for Matthew and his readers, this is what ultimately counts; otherwise, the book would not be a Gospel, for its story would not be “good news.”

The conflict between Jesus and his disciples hinges on the disciples’ opposition to Jesus as one who insists upon suffering and servanthood as constitutive of discipleship. Within the story, the disciples demonstrate a failure to grasp this essential component of Jesus’ teaching (19:13–14, 23–25; 20:20–28) and even rebuke him for thinking this way (16:22). The worst possible outcome for this

conflict, the reader imagines, would be for the disciples to reject Jesus altogether and cease to follow him. This, of course, is exactly what does happen when the conflict is resolved in Matthew's passion narrative (26:56, 69–75).

The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders is defined primarily in terms of the leaders' opposition to Jesus as one who exhibits or claims to have divine authority. As this conflict develops in the story, the religious leaders test Jesus (16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 34–35), challenge him (21:15, 23), make accusations against him (9:3, 34; 12:24), try to "entangle him in his talk" (22:15), and even plot to kill him (12:14; 26:3–4). The reader imagines that the worst possible outcome for this conflict would be for the leaders to be successful in turning the people against Jesus or in having Jesus put to death. Again, these worst-case scenarios come to pass when the conflict is resolved in Matthew's passion narrative.

The most interesting thing about these two conflicts is that Jesus apparently loses both. We must not imagine that these losses are simply overturned by the resurrection. For one thing, theologically, such a claim would trivialize the horrors of abandonment and crucifixion suffered by Jesus: the events of the passion were not *undone*, as though they never happened; Jesus will remain "the crucified one" forever. But even more to the point, in terms of Matthew's narrative rhetoric, no final resolution for the previous conflicts is found in the resurrection narrative. The disciples continue to respond to Jesus with a combination of worship and doubt (28:17), precisely as they did before (14:31–33). The religious leaders continue to oppose Jesus' claim of divine authority, dismissing him as an "impostor" (27:63); far from having been silenced or overcome, they continue to be successful in turning people against him (28:15). In a very real sense, they won! They wanted to remove Jesus from the scene, and they did so. He will no longer be doing the things that brought him into conflict with them: teaching in Galilee, healing in synagogues, overturning tables in the temple, and so on.

But for Matthew, the passion was not a temporary setback of what might have been (but wasn't), set right by the resurrection. Rather, it represented the purpose of Jesus' mission on earth, and the negative resolutions to his conflicts do not prevent fulfillment of the goal that brought Jesus to the cross. Jesus did not need to retain his disciples' loyalty or overcome the religious leaders' opposition in

order to save his people from their sins. In fact, ironically, he was unable to do those things if that goal was to be fulfilled. In short, he had to lose the conflicts with his disciples and with the religious leaders in order for the hidden conflict between God and Satan to be resolved favorably. Thus, when Jesus dies on the cross, he fulfills the will of God (see 26:39, 42) and defeats the will of Satan (see 16:21–23). This is the greatest irony of all in a narrative noted for its ironic touches: the defeat of Jesus and the triumph of his enemies is what facilitates the defeat of Satan and the triumph of God. (For a more detailed explication of these plot lines in Matthew's narrative, see Powell 1992.)

Theme 16. Critique of power, wealth, and wisdom. Matthew's Gospel offers a stark critique of worldly power (much like what is found in the book of Revelation). "Worldly power" means power that coerces or dominates, as opposed to power that serves. Jesus, of course, is the most powerful figure in the story, but his power is employed in service to others, sometimes sacrificially (20:28). Otherwise, human characters almost always use power coercively (if they possess it). Accordingly, two implicit value judgments underlie the entire narrative: (1) Characters are "evil" to the extent that they possess power (since they almost always use it coercively). (2) Characters are "good" to the extent that they lack power (or use it to serve, though that remains, for the most part, a hypothetical option).

We may consider, first, those who possess power. Look at what Matthew's Gospel says about political rulers:

- Satan is able to offer Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" because, apparently, they are under his authority (4:8–9).
- Jesus says to his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (20:25).
- King Herod (2:16) callously slaughters children in a manner like evil tyrants of old: the pharaoh in the days of Moses (Exod 1:15–22) and Nebuchadnezzar at the time of Jeremiah (cf. Matt 2:17–18 to Jer 31:15; 39:1–9).
- Herod's son Archelaus is as much to be feared as his father (2:22).
- Herod the tetrarch murders God's prophet (14:3, 10) and is perceived as a threat to Jesus as well (14:13).
- Pilate, the governor, reneges on his responsibility for administering justice by ordering the execution of a man he knows to be innocent (27:15–26).

Indeed, within the world of Matthew's story, we do not encounter a single political ruler who exhibits positive traits. And as indicated above (see Theme 14), the same holds true for *religious leaders*. In Matthew, religious leaders, without exception, are portrayed as evil enemies of God, aligned with Satan, the "evil one" (13:19). So it can probably be said that Matthew's antipathy for Jewish leaders owes less to the fact that they are *Jewish* than to the fact that they are *leaders*. The story's denunciation of worldly powers makes no ethnic distinctions. Jewish *leaders* and gentile *rulers* alike are condemned; but humble Jewish supplicants, as well as gentile ones (8:5–13; 15:21–28), are acceptable. The primary line of opposition in this story is not between Jews and gentiles but between the powerful and the powerless.

But now, as for the second "value judgment" indicated above: characters are "good" to the extent that they *lack* power. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the powerless are presented as people with whom Jesus' followers must identify:

- The coming of God's reign will be a blessing primarily to the oppressed people of the earth and to those who align themselves with them (5:3–12; see comments on this text).
- In contrast to political rulers, the followers of Jesus will emulate enslaved persons, seeking not to be served but to serve (20:25–28).
- In contrast to religious leaders, followers of Jesus will be learners in a community of equals, refusing positions of leadership (23:1–12).
- Jesus himself is portrayed as a person who "has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20), and his disciples are required to renounce their possessions and go out into the world with no apparent means of support (10:9–10), helpless as sheep in the midst of wolves (10:16).
- Little children are regarded as the greatest in the rule of heaven and should serve as role models for all followers of Jesus (18:1–4; 19:14).
- In a surprising twist at the end of the story, the church that Jesus has promised to build ends up being founded by women (28:1–10; see comments on this text).

So, for the most part, the powerless are good and the powerful are bad. Yet this theme may become more poignant when we observe that Matthew's critique of power extends to suspicion of two primary sources for such power: wealth and education.

First, Matthew's Gospel is highly suspicious of wealth:

- Jesus' disciples are called to give up their material possessions when they follow him (4:20, 22; 19:27; see also 10:8–10).
- Treasure in heaven is preferable to treasure on earth, since one's heart will always be with one's treasure (6:19–21).
- One cannot serve both God and mammon (NRSVue, "wealth," 6:24).
- A rich young man with potential for discipleship cannot follow Jesus because of his many possessions (19:16–22).
- It is harder for God to rule the life of a rich person than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (19:23–24).

Second, Matthew's Gospel also exhibits a lack of esteem for worldly wisdom and education:

- God creates or reveals what is needed, apparently preferring to write the divine will on almost blank slates.
 - John the Baptist claims that God is able to raise children of Abraham from stones (3:9).
 - Jesus thanks God for hiding the truth from the "wise and intelligent" and revealing it to infants (11:25).
 - Jesus says (quoting Scripture) that God brings forth praise from the mouths of nursing babies (21:16).
- Jesus' disciples exemplify ignorance:
 - They must be *given* understanding by Jesus (13:51; 16:12; 17:13; see Excursus: "Understanding" and Divine Revelation in Matthew, p. 158).
 - Never once in the Gospel are the disciples depicted as knowing the will of God or even the basic content or teaching of the Scriptures. The only time they come close is especially revealing; they know that "Elijah must come first" (17:10), but they do not know that this teaching comes from Scripture; it is only something that "the scribes say."
- By contrast, the religious leaders of Israel know a great many things:
 - The Christ is to be born in Bethlehem (2:4–6).
 - Elijah will come before the end arrives (17:10).
 - Moses commanded the giving of divorce certificates (19:7).
 - The Scriptures commend levirate marriage (22:24).
 - The Christ is to be the son of David (22:42).
 - It is unlawful to place blood money in the temple treasury (27:6).

Still, such knowledge does not aid them in doing the will of God; quite the contrary, it leads them to resist God's plan and oppose God's agents.

Surely Matthew would not want his readers to regard knowledge of Scripture as a bad thing. Still, Jesus' shocking words in 11:25 do seem to represent an underlying evaluation of education fundamental for the narrative as a whole. The problem is that wisdom and knowledge obtained through education can be a source of social power: in Matthew's vision, those who obtain power tend to use it coercively. The uneducated and the ignorant are special to God because they tend to be powerless.

In sum, Matthew's story world consists of those who are "first" but destined to be last, and those who are currently "last" but destined to be first (19:30; 20:16).

- Those who are "first" yet destined to be last include the following:
 - political rulers (20:25),
 - religious leaders (15:12–14; 23:13–36),
 - rich people (19:16–23), and
 - scholars (2:3–6; 16:12; 23:15).
- Those who are "last," destined to be first, include the following:
 - the meek (5:5),
 - servants or enslaved persons (10:24–25; 20:27; 24:45–46),
 - children (18:1–4; 19:13–15; see also 11:25),
 - little ones (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14),
 - the uneducated (11:25; 21:16),
 - the "least" (25:40, 45), and
 - women (28:1–10).

In the world of Matthew's story, the rule of God is presently challenged by the rule of Satan (12:24–29; 13:24–30, 36–43). Dynamics of literary conflict throughout the narrative turn on the fact that the "last who will be first" are aligned with the rule of God; and the "first who will be last" are aligned with the rule of Satan, opposed to God, and especially opposed to God's mission as it is manifested through Jesus and the church (see Theme 3). On the ultimate outcome of that conflict, see Theme 15.

Theme 17. Divine judgment and condemnation in Matthew. More than half of all references to hell in the Bible (NRSVue) occur in Matthew's Gospel. Motifs concerning the final judgment, condemnation of sinners, and eternal punishment run throughout the book, offering a counterpoint to emphases on mercy (5:7; 9:13, 27; 12:7; 15:22; 17:15; 18:33; 20:30–31; 23:23), compassion (9:36; 14:14; 15:32;

20:34); forgiveness (6:12, 14–15; 9:2–8; 12:31–32; 18:21–35; 26:28), salvation (1:21; 8:11; 10:22; 13:43; 16:25; 19:25–26; 21:31; 24:13, 22; 27:42), and rewards (5:12; 6:4, 6, 18; 10:40–42; 19:27–30).

Here is a representative (though not comprehensive) list of things Jesus says about divine judgment and condemnation in Matthew:

- Those whose righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees will never enter the rule of heaven (5:20).
- Those who insult their siblings or are angry with them will be liable to judgment and the hell of fire (5:22).
- Drastic measures must be taken (metaphorically, cutting off one's body parts or plucking out one's eyes) so as not to be thrown into hell (5:29–30; 18:8–9).
- God will not forgive the debts of people who do not offer such forgiveness to their fellow human beings (6:14–15; 18:23–35).
- Few find the hard road that leads to life; most follow the easy road to destruction (7:13).
- Many who seek entrance to the rule of heaven will be shut out on the last day because, even though they called Jesus “Lord,” they did not do the will of his Father (7:21–23).
- Many of those whom God initially offered a place in the rule of heaven will be thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (8:12; see also 13:42; 22:13–14; 25:30).
- Sodom and Gomorrah will fare better on the day of judgment than towns that fail to welcome apostles with the message of God's reign (10:15). Specific condemnations of Chorazin and Bethsaida are in 11:20–24.
- Do not fear those who kill only the body, but fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (10:28).
- Anyone who denies Jesus before others will be denied by him before his Father in heaven (10:32–33).
- Those who find their life in this world will lose it in the next (10:39; 16:25–26).
- Those who speak against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven in this age or in the age to come (12:31–32).
- On the day of judgment, people will need to account for their unguarded speech (i.e., words that reveal their true nature) and will be justified or condemned accordingly (12:36–37).
- At the end of the age, the Son of Man will send angels to collect all causes of sin and evildoers and throw them into the furnace of fire (13:41–42, 49–50).
- When the Son of Man comes with angels, he will repay everyone for what was done (16:27).

- People who do not become like little children will never enter the rule of heaven (18:3).
- A horrible fate awaits any who hinder little children from being the persons God wants them to be (18:6–7).
- It is essentially impossible for a rich person to enter the rule of heaven (19:23–24; but see 19:26).
- God’s ruling presence and power will be taken away from the religious leaders of Israel and given to others (21:43).
- The scribes and Pharisees and their converts are children of hell (23:15) and will not escape being sentenced to hell (23:33).
- The coming of the Son of Man will overtake many like the flood in Noah’s day, bringing destruction upon those who are not prepared (24:36–44).
- God may be likened to a householder who cuts an unfaithful steward to pieces (24:45–51), to a groom who shuts delayed bridesmaids out of the wedding feast (25:1–12), to a master who punishes an enslaved person who does nothing to increase the master’s wealth (25:14–30), or to a king who condemns uncharitable subjects to eternal punishment (25:31–46).
- It would be better never to have been born than to suffer the fate of one who betrays Jesus (26:23–24).

We should note, however, a strong affirmation in Matthew that judgment and condemnation lie within the province of God alone: human beings must never judge one another (7:1–2) or presume to decide who is destined for heaven or hell (13:27–30).

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