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*Reflections on the Gospel*



James Woodward, Paula Gooder  
and Mark Pryce

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*To Clare and Alan Amos, with appreciation and respect*

*‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for  
the kingdom of heaven is like the master of  
a household who brings out of his treasure  
what is new and what is old.’*

*Matthew 13.52*

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## *Preface: What is this book about?*

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The Revised Common Lectionary has established itself both in Anglican parishes and other denominations as the framework within which the Bible is read on Sundays in public worship. It follows a three-year pattern, taking each of the Synoptic Gospels and reading substantial parts of them in the cycle of the liturgical year. While each of the three years is dedicated in turn to readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke, during parts of the year extensive use is made of John, which will be the subject of the fourth and final volume in this series.

All three authors have extensive experience of reading, preaching, leading, learning and teaching within this framework. We have worked in a variety of contexts: universities, theological colleges, parishes, chaplaincies and religious communities. We share a passion for theological learning that is collaborative, inclusive, intelligent and transformative. This shared concern brought us together across our participation in various aspects of the life of the Diocese of Birmingham in 2007. We started a conversation about how best we might help individuals and groups understand and use the Gospels. We aspired to provide a short resource for Christians in busy and distracted lives so that the Gospel narrative might be explained, illuminated and interpreted for discipleship and service.

This third volume has grown out of our conversations about Matthew. We hope that it will enable readers (alone or in groups) to get a flavour of Matthew's Gospel: to understand something about the events that caused it to be written in the first place; to enter into the shape of the Gospel in the form that the lectionary presents it to us; to enter imaginatively into its life, its concerns and its message; and in so doing to encounter afresh the story of Jesus and, like the disciples on the mountain

## *Preface*

in Galilee (Matthew 28.17), to worship even in the midst of the doubts that so often crowd around us.

The present book has emerged out of shared study and reflection, during which we attended to the text of the Gospel and examined how best to break open its character, with the intention of offering a mixture of information, interpretation and reflection on life experience in the light of faith. To this end Paula Gooder provides an introduction to the biblical text, Mark Pryce offers creative interpretations of each theme and James Woodward offers a range of styles of reflection. We have all been able to comment on and shape each other's contributions. We hope that the material will be used in whatever way might help the learning life of disciples and communities of faith, and expect some of it to provide a base for study days and preparation for teaching and preaching.

Such a short volume as this can make no claim to comprehensiveness. The choice of seasons and texts has been determined by our attention to the liturgical year and shaped by our attempt to present some of the key characteristics of the Gospel.

First we offer a concise introduction to the main characteristics and themes of Matthew's Gospel. Paula helps us into the shape of the Gospel through a discussion of the person of Matthew, his storytelling technique, his vision as a historian and the main theological themes of the Gospel. In the nine subsequent chapters, which follow the major seasons in the cycle of the Church's liturgical year, Paula offers us material to expound the particular style of the Gospel, Mark's theology is distilled into poetry and prose that offers us imaginative spiritual insights grounded in the Gospel messages, while James offers pastoral and practical theological reflections that bring together faith and experience. At the end of each chapter we ask readers to consider this material in the light of their own understanding and experience, with questions that might form the basis of group conversation and study. A prayer shaped by



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the theme of the chapter invites further contemplation of the Gospel text as it is rooted in faith and discipleship.

Throughout the book our aim has been to wear our scholarship lightly so that the book is both accessible and stimulating. We make no claim to comprehensiveness: for the sake of clarity and brevity we have been selective in our choice of themes. At the end of the book we offer some resources for further learning.

We hope that you will find this book useful, building on the previous volumes on the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and that it will give you a glimpse of how much we have gained from our collaboration on this project. We thank Ruth McCurry, our editor, for her trust and forbearance. We also thank all those people and communities that have enriched, informed and challenged our responses to the Gospel.

*James Woodward*  
*Paula Gooder*  
*Mark Pryce*

# *Introduction: Getting to know the Gospel of Matthew*



## *Exploring the text*

Matthew's Gospel sometimes evokes a mixed response from its readers, much more so than either Mark or Luke. While Matthew's Gospel contains iconic and well-loved episodes such as the visit of the Magi (2.1) or the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5—7), it also includes some much more difficult passages. For example, in Matthew people are more often condemned either to the outer darkness or to the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew's Gospel contains the apparently brutal parable of the wedding banquet, in which a guest is evicted from the feast simply for wearing the wrong clothes (22.12–13), as well as, in chapter 23, a long string of woes against the Pharisees. As a result of passages like these, Matthew's Gospel can feel condemnatory as well as encouraging; harsh as well as loving. All in all it is a more challenging Gospel.

This raises the question of why it has a harsher edge. Why is it that the Gospel seems to be so much more critical of those around? Why is judgement so near to the surface? Why does it appear so harsh so often? Scholars have often answered this question by exploring the audience and context of the Gospel, so this seems a good place from which to begin our exploration of Matthew.

### **Who was Matthew?**

The first question to ask as we explore the issue of the audience and context of a Gospel is, of course, who wrote it? Traditionally, the first canonical Gospel was attributed to someone called Matthew. This association was made fairly early on in the life

of the Gospel by Papias, a bishop in Hierapolis (in modern Turkey), possibly as early as 125 AD.

The same view was repeated by Irenaeus (c. 130–200), Bishop of Lyons, around 50 years later. By the end of the second century, that Matthew was clearly linked in people's minds with the Matthew who was named as one of the Twelve in Matthew's Gospel and identified as a former tax collector (Matthew 9.9; 10.3).

This identification immediately throws up a problem. In Matthew's Gospel the tax collector is called 'Matthew', whereas in Mark 2.14 and Luke 5.27, in apparently the same story, he is called 'Levi'. There is no agreement among scholars about why this might be the case. Options include the two stories being similar but not the same (so referring to two different people); the man having two names, one known by Matthew's readers and the other by Mark and Luke; there being no reference to a Levi who was one of Jesus' disciples but there is one to a Matthew and so the two characters were conflated; or that the author of Matthew's Gospel was this person and he preferred to refer to himself by a different name. In reality, there is no good explanation for the change, and the reason why he is called Matthew in one Gospel and Levi in two others remains a mystery.

## **Tax collectors**

It is much clearer, however, that this person, Matthew or Levi, was known as a tax or toll collector. It is clear from elsewhere in the Gospels that tax collectors were hated. Many people ascribe this hatred to a corrupt taxation system known as tax farming. For many years the Roman Empire used the system, adopted from the Greek city states, which allowed tax collectors (known in Latin as *Publicani* and hence called publicans in the KJV) to buy from the empire the right to collect taxes. This meant that they paid the Romans a fixed fee which gave them permission to collect tax. They often recouped this fee many

times over by charging extortionate rates of tax in the region where they were collectors.

Julius Caesar, however, had outlawed tax farming, so that by Jesus' time the system was no longer used. Instead the Romans paid officials to collect the tax directly. As a result the hatred felt for tax collectors might have been historic, or might simply have arisen because they worked directly for the Romans or because they collected what was perceived to be an unfair tax (it might of course have been all three!).

Of particular interest in the account of the calling of Matthew is the fact that he was sitting at a toll booth in Capernaum when Jesus called him to follow. Capernaum was a crucially important town in Galilee (which probably explains why Jesus chose to relocate there from Nazareth). As well as being a Roman garrison town, Capernaum lay close to the border between Herod Antipas' territory and that of his half-brother Philip the Tetrarch (sometimes also known as Herod Philip). It was also on the trade route between the Roman port of Caesarea and the city of Damascus. As a result, the tax collector in Capernaum would have collected the tolls of those crossing the border between Herod Antipas' territory and Philip's on their way to trade in Damascus. Such a role would have been highly lucrative, which may give us some insight into the nature of a character who could occupy such a profitable, if dangerous, position.

The question remains, however, of how reliable is the tradition that links the author of the first Gospel with Matthew the tax collector. As always, this is a subject upon which scholars take different views and about which each reader must make up his or her own mind. But, for the sake of simplicity, in what follows we will call the author of the Gospel Matthew, following two millennia of Christian tradition.

## **Matthew as a Jewish Gospel**

If there is disagreement about whether the first Gospel was written by a tax collector, there is a much greater level of agreement

about the Jewish nature of Matthew's Gospel. The same Papias who declared that the author of the Gospel was called Matthew, also declared that its author collected the sayings of Jesus (or about Jesus) in the Hebrew language (or in the Hebrew style).

On one level this raises problems. Even the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel are in Greek, but more importantly the Gospel gives no indication that it was translated. It contains more Hebraisms (i.e. stylistic quirks that someone who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic may have introduced into the Greek text\*) than the other Gospels, but not so many as to suggest that it was first written in Hebrew or Aramaic and then translated. The Hebraisms include turns of phrase like saying that the Magi 'rejoiced with great joy', which has been smoothed out in the NRSV to 'they were overwhelmed with joy' (Matthew 2.10). Such turns of phrase are characteristically Semitic and suggest the author might have been thinking in Hebrew or Aramaic, even if not writing in it.

So we are left with the question of what Papias meant when he said that Matthew collected the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language. Did he, perhaps, collect the sayings of Jesus that had been preserved in the Hebrew language? Or perhaps he wrote an earlier collection in Hebrew/Aramaic which was then rewritten into the Gospel. It is almost impossible to tell. One option is that Papias' phrase should be translated not as 'Hebrew language' but 'Hebrew style'; thus he would be saying that Matthew wrote from a Jewish perspective and with a Jewish audience in mind. This much seems clear. Matthew's Gospel is evidently Hebrew in tone. Its theology has Hebraic resonances; it rarely explains any Jewish practices and it draws heavily on the Old Testament.

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\* Aramaic is the language that became the 'lingua franca' or everyday language in the Babylonian and subsequent empires. It is a Semitic language, and therefore is very similar to Hebrew, but was spoken outside Israel for many years. At the time of Jesus, although Greek was now the language of the empire, people in Israel spoke Aramaic every day and used Hebrew only for worship.

Indeed Matthew's use of the Old Testament is fascinating. Matthew refers to the Old Testament in a variety of ways:

- Sometimes he quotes directly from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (also known as the Septuagint or LXX). For example, Matthew 21.16 cites Psalm 8.2 as 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'. Here the LXX reads the same, 'have prepared praise', but the Hebrew reads instead 'you have established might'. So in this instance it is clear he is quoting from the LXX.
- Sometimes he retranslates the Old Testament into Greek from Hebrew. For example, Matthew 11.29 reads 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' This is a quotation from Jeremiah 6.16; in the LXX it reads 'and you will find purification for your souls', whereas the Hebrew like Matthew reads 'and you will find rest for your souls'. So here it is clear that Matthew was using the Hebrew text.
- Sometimes he uses composite quotations taken from different places in the Old Testament. For example Matthew 27.9–10 quotes what is said to be Jeremiah in the context of Judas' receiving 30 pieces of silver. The passage reads: 'Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me"', which combines Jeremiah 18.12 and 32.8–9 with Zechariah 11.12–13.
- Occasionally he even attributes a quote to the Old Testament that is not easy to find. For example, Matthew 2.23 states that he made 'his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He

will be called a Nazorean.”” The quotation is best explained as a Semitic play on words using the Hebrew word for branch, which if transliterated from Hebrew into Aramaic and then into Greek could end up in a form similar to Nazorean. This throws up the possibility that Matthew was not referring to the Old Testament but quoting from memory, and that he knew both the Greek and the Hebrew versions of the Old Testament but sometimes muddled them (and indeed the names of the prophets) up.

It has been said that an argument against Matthew being Jewish comes towards the end of the Gospel with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Here we encounter a somewhat odd detail: Jesus sends his disciples to find ‘a donkey tied, and a colt with her’. This, Matthew makes clear, is in fulfilment of Zechariah 9.9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious  
is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of  
a donkey.

As a result Matthew 21.7 has Jesus riding on both the donkey and the colt simultaneously (a feat that has challenged many people’s imaginations). Someone from the Hebrew tradition would probably have known that Zechariah was employing Hebrew parallelism here, in which the same point is made twice, whereas Matthew appears to assume that two different animals are involved – a donkey and a colt. Odd as this detail is, it does not detract from the rest of the Hebraic nature of the rest of the Gospel and may be put down to Matthew’s tendency to provide extravagant images for effect (e.g. at Jesus’ crucifixion in Matthew 27.51–52, not only is the veil of the Temple torn in two as in the other two Gospels, but there is also an earthquake that allows the dead to rise).

One of the most strikingly Hebraic features of Matthew's Gospel is the portrayal of Jesus as a new Moses, and possibly the Gospel itself as a new Torah. It is important not to press these resonances too far, but we can observe some fascinating similarities. The Gospel begins with a genealogy – similar to many of those in the Torah – and indeed the opening sentence declares that this is a '*biblos geneseōs*' of Jesus Christ, using the same word as the Greek name, 'Genesis', of the first book of the Bible.

Also interesting are the parallels between Jesus' birth and that of Moses: born into a hostile environment, his parents are forced to take extreme action to save the life of the newborn baby and must leave Egypt to enable the salvation of God's people. The way in which Matthew recounts the birth narratives brings to mind on more than one occasion the infancy of Moses. Much more important still, however, is the Sermon on the Mount. Here, as in Exodus, the law is given on a mountain. As in Exodus the commandments that will shape the lived reality of God's people are given by a man, and in Matthew this man is Jesus – the new Moses.

In the light of all of this it is interesting that the Gospel is clearly five-fold in structure (like the five-fold structure of the Torah), with the addition of a prologue that contains the beginning of Jesus' life and an epilogue that contains his end and subsequent resurrection. Each of the five principal units seems to have two elements: a major narrative, followed by a discourse. Furthermore, each unit begins in a similar way, which translated into English reads 'When Jesus had . . .' (see Matthew 8.1; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1).

The structure of the Gospel appears to be like this:

- prologue: genealogy, nativity and infancy narratives [Matthew 1—2];
- first narrative (the baptism of Jesus) and discourse (the Sermon on the Mount) [Matthew 3—7];



- second narrative (three miracles with two stories of discipleship) and discourse (focusing on mission and suffering) [Matthew 8—10];
- third narrative (conflict with Jesus' opponents) and discourse (a series of parables) [Matthew 11—13.52];
- fourth narrative (increasing opposition to Jesus) and discourse (preparation of the disciples for Jesus' absence) [Matthew 13.53—18];
- fifth narrative (Jesus travels to Jerusalem) and discourse (the coming end) [Matthew 19.1—20];
- epilogue: the last week of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and great commission [Matthew 21—28].

Like all attempts to discern the structure of biblical books, this list comes with the caveat that some of the units are more obvious than others. For example, the first narrative and discourse, which contains Jesus' baptism followed by the Sermon on the Mount, seems very clear indeed; whereas subsequent ones, such as the third narrative and discourse, are less easy to perceive. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus among scholars that Matthew's Gospel can be seen to have five key parts. Given the Hebraic tone of the rest of the Gospel – and particularly its emphasis on Jesus as being a new Moses – it does not seem over-fanciful to draw a connection between the five units of Matthew's Gospel and the five books of the Torah.

### **Matthew as an anti-Jewish Gospel**

It is clear that Matthew's Gospel was written by someone who was Jewish. The author seems to know his Old Testament well, to be portraying Jesus as a new Moses and Jesus' teachings as a new Torah, and to expect his readers to understand Jewish practice. What is unsettling, however, is that Matthew may be both the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish Gospel. No one can read Matthew 23 and its list of 'woes' – 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' (23.13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29) –

- Matthew 9.35: ‘Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.’
- Matthew 10.17: ‘Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues.’

This might appear to be a small detail, but in a Gospel that is so clearly Jewish in origin and probably written for a Jewish audience it becomes a very important one. Why would Matthew refer to ‘their synagogues’? The best explanation that scholars have found is that he is differentiating between ‘their synagogues’ and ‘our synagogues’.

For much of the twentieth century, scholars assumed that there was a final and dramatic split between the Rabbinic Jewish community and the Jewish Christian community after the fall of the Temple in AD 70. After the Romans were victorious in the Jewish war, they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. This was an astute move if they wanted to subjugate the Jewish people. The Temple had been the symbolic unifying factor within Judaism. As a result, many diverse groups (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, etc.) were able to coexist within Judaism thanks to the unifying pull exerted by the Temple.

Once the Temple was destroyed, this unifying force no longer existed and Judaism had to find a new form of self-definition. For much of the twentieth century, scholars believed that the Jewish leaders thereafter convened a council in Jamnia (known in Hebrew as Yavneh) out of which they made various promulgations. One of these was a set of 18 prayers or benedictions to be recited by faithful Jews throughout the day. The twelfth prayer was thought to include a cursing of Christians, and this, scholars believed, marked a ‘parting of the ways’ between Judaism and Christianity.

More recent scholarship recognizes that this is an exaggeration of the evidence. There is no evidence of a council at Jamnia at which promulgations were made. The 18 benedictions, otherwise

without feelings of profound unease. Jesus' criticism of the scribes and Pharisees in this chapter is more vehement than in any other Gospel. He condemns them for a wide range of evils, from hypocrisy to leading people astray, from loving the Temple's money more than the Temple itself to paying attention to minutiae and missing the point of the law. On and on the chapter goes, flaying the scribes and Pharisees for a wide range of sins.

This raises the question of why this condemnation is so much more bitter in Matthew than elsewhere. The explanation often given by scholars is that such hostility tells us a lot about the community to which Matthew was writing.

Scholars who express an interest in Matthew's community often use a technique known as 'redaction criticism' to read the Gospel. The term redaction is taken from the German term *Redaktion*, which means simply 'editing'. The premise from which such theories begin is that when Matthew wrote his Gospel he used one or more sources: Mark, possibly the hypothetical source 'Q', and his own material, which scholars often call 'M'. Redaction criticism pays attention to the small details where Matthew's Gospel is noticeably different from those of Mark and Luke and puts them together to see if the picture that emerges can tell us something about the changes that Matthew made to his sources.

## **The parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity**

One interesting feature to emerge from this process is that, alongside the negative comments about the scribes and Pharisees that we have already identified, there are a number of references which refer to 'their synagogues':

- Matthew 4.23: 'Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.'

known as the *Amidah*, remain at the heart of Jewish liturgy but it is clear that they are not focused on Christians. Only one of the 18 prayers has anything to do with Christians and the word used there is ‘*minim*’, which means sectarians or heretics. While it clearly includes Christians, there is nothing to suggest that it was directed solely against them.

Nevertheless, the period following the fall of the Temple was one in which Judaism sought to redefine itself. One of the markers of this redefinition was a much greater clarity about what counted as Judaism and what did not. There is now strong evidence that Jewish Christians retained their Jewish identity and often continued attending their local synagogue well into the fourth century AD, if not beyond. But at the same time there was conflict during this period between the Rabbis, who sought to redefine Judaism, particularly in terms of a renewed focus on the Torah, and the Jewish Christians, who sought to redefine Judaism in terms of a focus on Jesus Christ.

Scholars discern in Matthew’s Gospel not anti-Semitism (which can only happen in groups that are not Jewish) but a struggle between two Jewish groups as to what did and did not count as Judaism. If you recognize that Matthew’s Gospel is profoundly Jewish, then what he is doing is redefining Judaism around Jesus Christ. His portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses, giving a new law on a new mountain, points his followers to a radical new way of being Jewish which centres not on the Temple or on Torah but on Jesus Christ. His profound criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, who claim to lead the people correctly but whom he believes to be hypocritical and shallow, can be seen as a sideswipe at the leaders of a rival group within Judaism.

## **Where and when was the Gospel written?**

Exploring what Matthew’s community might have looked like inevitably brings us to the question of where the Gospel might have been written. This too is very difficult to answer. Christian

tradition points to Antioch, in Syria, but the source of the Gospel could have been any major town or city in which there were large enough groups of Jews to spark a conflict between Matthew's community and those who believed that Judaism must be expressed in a different way. Given that Judaism's period of self-definition was focused in the late first century following the fall of the Temple, many scholars believe that this is the most likely date for its composition (probably in the mid to late 70s AD); others, though, would argue that the period of conflict was earlier, not after the fall of the Temple but before it, around the time when the Jewish war began (AD 66–72). If this is correct then Matthew's Gospel may date from around the late 60s AD.

Matthew's Gospel may be an uncomfortable read at times but if you scratch below the surface and exercise historical imagination, it becomes possible to imagine a context in which this kind of language and expression become understandable. If Matthew's community was experiencing severe pressure from other Jewish groups, then it would be unsurprising for Matthew to strike back with a clearly articulated view of why his form of Judaism was not only defensible but a proper way of worshipping the God of heaven and earth.

If scholars are correct in their view of Matthew's community, then Matthew's Gospel, perhaps more than any of the others, offers us a snapshot not just of Jesus' life but also of the life of an early Christian community as they tried to work out who they were and what following Jesus meant.

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