

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Session V

Last Week's Questions

I think I do have a question which pertains to the attendees at the crucifixion. This may sound very silly but where was Joseph? In John's Gospel it mentions that Jesus tells Mary "mother behold your son" and then he says to (I assume) Peter (paraphrasing) "behold your mother". Would this be so that Mary would've been taken care of after Jesus is gone? Didn't she have other sons by this time?

This is a four-parter: 1) where's Joseph, 2) who is the beloved disciple to whom Jesus commends his mother, 3) why does he commend his mother to him, and 4) did Mary have other sons?

Actually, you are anticipating material to be covered—somewhat—in this session. I will comment a little more fully on brothers and sisters later in this session AND the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

However, the questions concerning the crucifixion arise from John's gospel account of the crucifixion which includes information that does not appear in any of the synoptic accounts. The passage of scripture to which you allude is: *"When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. [John 19:26-27]"*

The presumed "beloved disciple" is traditionally understood to be John, one of the sons of Zebedee. This John is believed—according to some traditions—to be the author of the gospel account, the epistles attributed to John, as well as the Revelation. Whether or not this John is author of any or all of the writings bearing the name 'John' is disputed by many biblical scholars.

As for the enigmatic Joseph: Matthew only mentions him eight times (7 times in the birth narrative and 1 more time in chapter 13), Luke mentions him 4 times (3 times in the birth narrative and 1 more time in his section similar to Matthew's question in chapter 13), John mentions him 4 times just as an identifier of Jesus (John has no birth narrative), and Mark never mentions Joseph at all.

As you can see, the Bible doesn't give much information concerning Joseph, other than he was a good man and as an identifier of Jesus—as in, "Jesus, son of Joseph."

What's in a name: Matthew most frequently and intentionally uses the phrase "son of Joseph" as opposed to "son of Mary". The latter would have been seen as an affront to most Jewish communities.

What's in a name: in ancient times, the closest we have to a 'first' and 'last' name is the Aramaic 'bar' or Hebrew 'ben'. The connector simply means 'son of' and assumes everyone knows the father by name. Jesus bar/ben Joseph. "You know, the carpenter's kid."

This silence, of course, opens the door to grand speculation. In the "History of Joseph", a 5th or 6th C.E. document, he is described as having a long life, 111 years. It also describes him as marrying Mary when he was 90.

This means that he would have died before Jesus had begun his ministry.

However, other scholars believe that he would have been approximately the same age as Mary. Some scholars believe that he was previously married.

The death of Joseph is assumed to have occurred after the temple incident (when Jesus' parents lose Jesus in Jerusalem—only Luke mentions the incident) and before Jesus' public ministry (only Mary ever seems to be present). Some scholars point to the passage in John—which initiated this conversation—as proof that Joseph was dead, because there would be no one to take care of Mary.

All of that probably raises more questions than it answered.

Introduction

A brief word concerning how I've selected the section headings, both previously as well as going forward. The sections can be seen as pericopes. Remember that chapter and verses of Biblical text were added much, much after the texts were first authored. So, trying to study the Bible by chapter seems a bit contrived to me.

Factoid: A **Pericope** is a set of verses that forms one coherent unit of thought. It comes from the Greek word **περικοπη** which means "a cutting out".

Let's move onto this next session.

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Two Sabbath Controversies

Read Matthew 12:1-14

During the first century C.E., during both the time of Jesus' teaching as well as that of Matthew's writing, there was a great debate centering on the understanding of the Sabbath. Essentially, there were two understandings of the purpose of the Sabbath. Simply put the issue was: is the Sabbath made for human beings, or is it for the worship of God? Is the Sabbath a remembrance of creation or of the exodus?

This was a critical debate because Sabbath observance was one aspect of Jewish identity and therefore essential to Judaism. For Jews, how are we to understand the Sabbath, was critical.

Factoid: Traits of Jewish Identity: circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance.

Although references to Jewish observances of the Sabbath can be found in almost every phase of Israel's history, there seems to be no doubt that Sabbath observance became especially prominent during the Babylonian exile and carried on. Deprived of its Temple, capital city (Jerusalem), and homeland, the Jewish exiles emphasized the Sabbath as a very important religious obligation. Observance of the Sabbath was not dependent on the existence of the Temple.

This would be paramount to Matthew's readers, as the Temple was destroyed by Rome in 66 C.E.

and there was no expectation of it being rebuilt.

In order to keep the sides of the debate simple, let's just say that the very conservative Essenes and the slightly more practical (definitely not liberal!) Pharisees disagreed on the significance of the Sabbath observance. The Essenes took the position that the Sabbath was holy because God rested on the seventh day and therefore everyone was to honor God by resting on the seventh day—everyone—no exceptions (Exodus 20:11).

The Pharisees took the humanitarian position that the Sabbath was holy because it was made for man: “*You were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord our God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.*” (Deuteronomy 5:15).

The conservative Essenes in the *Damascus Document* said that “*If a beast fall into a cistern or into a pit, let it not be lifted out on the Sabbath.*” However, the pharisaic approach was that if a dumb animal wandered into a pit and was going to die, it was okay to break the Sabbath observance and pull it out of the pit, as it was essential to the owners well-being.

This is what framed the debate at the time when Jesus jumped on board. Although he appears to be agreeing with the Pharisees—whaaaaat?— he derails it all by introducing a ‘Christological’ element.

Jesus is the authoritative teacher: his teachings and example are to be followed. Jesus as the healer; he has authority over the Sabbath regulations. The Pharisees would have agreed with Jesus **IF** the healing was needed to save the man’s life, but this was a chronic illness. It could wait until tomorrow. But Jesus’ actions stress that he has authority over the Sabbath.

In a sense, Matthew keeps relating stories that demonstrate the divinity of Jesus. He’s not just ‘Son of David’, but ‘Son of God’, the Messiah who has initiated the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God—the Messianic Age. Jesus’ words and actions in these two stories make the debate a Christological debate as well. Who is this Jesus?

Jesus As God’s Servant Read Matthew 12:15-21

This section is basically an affirmation of the previous section: Jesus is God’s Servant and Son. This section is primarily a fulfillment quotation based on Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-4), but emphasizing that this is how God’s servant operates, not publically, but meekly and gently. “*He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. (15:19)*”.

For members of Matthew’s community this section would have underscored Jesus’ power as a healer already made clear in chapters 8–9 and in 12:9-14. This section would also have been seen as a criticism of the Pharisees and their failure to recognize Jesus as the Servant of God and the bearer of the Holy Spirit.

The Source of Jesus’ Power Read Matthew 12:22-37

Exorcisms were not an unknown thing, so that’s not the issue in this section. The issue is

concerned with the source of Jesus' power to perform such a healing. The crowd calls Jesus 'son of David,' whereas the Pharisees conclude that Jesus heals by means of demonic power.

In this story, the blind/mute man sees who Jesus is—get that, the blind man sees—as does the crowd. The Pharisees do not perceive nor hear what is truly happening around them. The contrast between these two understandings is evident.

What's in a Name?
Beelzebul, Beelzebub and Beezebul: a rose by any other name is still Satan —'Beelzebul, prince of demons'—at least at Matthew's time.

During the *End Time*, the apocalyptic battle will be between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Jesus understands that this event—Messianic Age—is already in progress and these two kingdoms are mutually exclusive. He states that if he is working against Satan—casting out demons—then he must be a part of God's Kingdom.

This healing is also a sign of the presence of God's kingdom, a presence the Pharisees are ignoring. The power that Jesus has to perform such a miracle is derived from the Holy Spirit—in Judaism, 'breath' of God is associated with Spirit. Thus Jesus' message about blasphemy. Blasphemy in the Hebrew scriptures is relegated to the use of God's sacred name. In this instance, one is to infer that to challenge Jesus' action of healing is to challenge the divine spirit that is empowering him, and that this is unforgivable.

Factoid: In Greek 'blasphemy' (βλασφημία) means to injure the reputation of someone.

Does this mean that if someone refuses to believe in Jesus, that person will never be forgiven? Perhaps, but I tend to think that Jesus is emphasizing—hyperbole is one of Jesus' things—the rejection of him. Upon the cross, Jesus does utter: "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.* (Luke 23:34)". We might consider that, by this statement, any and all sins that are repented can be forgiven by God—in this life and the next.

The Sign of Jonah **Read Matthew 12:38-42**

In this section the scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus to give them a sign (not just a few healing miracles) that he really is who he implies that he is. I can't imagine what sort of sign might impress them, but still Jesus refuses.

The reason he gives for not performing a satisfactory sign for the scribes and Pharisees is that they have been unfaithful—the relationship between Israel and God was frequently seen as a marriage. Jesus charges the scribes and Pharisees with adultery.

However, he does reference Jonah (Jonah 1:17) as well, which is to be seen as a prophesy. Although Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, this "sign" that is to be offered definitely refers to the time between Good Friday and the Resurrection. He also states that the people of Nineveh—those who repented of their sins—will be the judges of the scribes and Pharisees for their unfaithfulness. The people of Nineveh were not Jews, but rather, Assyrians—the city was in what we'd know as Iraq.

He also implies that even gentiles will be their judges. This is the reference to the Queen of Sheba

who came to test Solomon’s wisdom and ultimately declared: “*The report was true which I heard in my own land of your affairs and of your wisdom ... (I Kings 10:6).*”

The Evil Generation & the Family of Jesus Read Matthew 12:43-50

This section starts with a condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees—the evil generation—and then moves onto who is the true family of Jesus. The short story concerning the demon and its seven other friends is not indicative any one person, but rather suggests that the exorcisms done by Jesus were only an interlude and promises that worse things will happen in the *End Time*.

Down the Rabbit Hole: The perpetual virginity of Mary is one of the four Marian dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, and states that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a virgin ante partum, in partu, et post partum—before, during and after the birth of Christ.

Jesus’ Family: the term ‘brothers—*αδελφοι*—has been interpreted in several ways—the blood brothers of Jesus born of Mary and Joseph; the half-brothers of Jesus, the children of Joseph’s by a prior marriage; or the cousins of Jesus based on the fact that ‘brother’ can cover a wide range of relationships. It is, however, doubtful that Matthew knew of the tradition about the perpetual virginity of Mary.

However, the simple point of mentioning Jesus’ family is that Jesus is attempting to redefine membership in his family as those willing to do the will of his heavenly Father. The context of many of these sections is making a choice.

The Parable of the Seeds (a.k.a. The Parable of the Sower) Read Matthew 13:1-23

This is perhaps one of the most familiar parables of Jesus and despite the fact that it in part demonstrates God’s graciousness—the seeds are spread everywhere—the story is really more about the seeds than the farmer. This is emphasized by its placement with the previous sections concerning choosing sides.

Matthew places this parable in the context of making choices, which then implies that it is really about the seeds: those that refuse to hear, those that lack commitment, those that believe and thrive. Certainly, many might make much about an ancient farming practice that a farmer scattered the seed on the land and then plowed it—I’ve even preached on this parable in that vane—however, Jesus never mentions anything other than the scattering.

Remember, Jesus has said that those with ears will listen and hear.

As a story-teller, I feel compelled to comment on the fact that a good story-teller never explains his stories. This makes me suspect of Jesus providing an explanation. Perhaps it is simply Matthew’s editing of the story in order that his community clearly understands the importance of having ears and ‘hearing’ the story. This is his encouragement of understanding that Jesus has the authority of God to teach as no one else.

Other Parables
Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven
Read Matthew 13:24-52

Sticking with his farming stories, Jesus continues with seeds: good seeds infiltrated by bad seeds and little tiny seeds, like those of the mustard bush—yes, bush, because it really wasn't a tree.

The parable of the 'wheat and weeds' (13:24-30) is that some Jews accept and others reject the gospel. It teaches that Christians should be patient and tolerant because there must be confidence that in the *End Time* it will all be sorted out by God.

Although he turns to a fishing mode, the parable of the dragnet (13:47-50) offers the same anticipation of the *End Time* as that of "wheat and weeds."

The parables concerning leavened bread, hidden treasures, and pearls are to emphasize the fact that the message offered by Jesus—his understanding and interpretation of Torah—are there to be discovered by those who are willing to listen and hear.

An important phrase that can be easily glossed over are verses 34 and 35: "...and he said nothing to them without a parable in order that what was said through the prophet might be fulfilled: I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden from the foundations of the world. (13:34, 35)."

This is a fulfillment quotation from Psalm 78: "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought. (Ps. 78:14)." Again, fulfillment quotations emphasize Jesus' connection with the Hebrew scriptures.

Rejection By His Own
Read Matthew 13:53-58

After this collection of parables and teachings, Jesus returns to Nazareth—although the Greek word 'patris' (πατρις) technically means 'country' here, seen in the context of the presence of family members, it can also mean 'hometown.' The significance of having Jesus in Nazareth is two-fold: 1) to emphasize 'their synagogue' and 2) establish a setting for the 'prejudice of familiarity'.

Factoid: At the time of Jesus a synagogue was not necessarily understood as a building and in fact may have only been seen as a 'gathering' or 'assembly' of people.

Instead of using a phrase such as, 'the synagogue' Matthew sees the phrase 'their synagogue' as a further separation from the traditional seat of teaching and learning. This, of course, would have been readily understood by Matthew's community of readers and perceived as supporting their choice to follow Jesus and his teachings rather than that of the Pharisees.

Down the Rabbit Hole (Part 2): The most natural inference from the Christian scriptures is that Jesus had younger brothers and sisters by his parents—Mary and Joseph—and appears to have been accepted by early (2nd Century) Church Fathers: Tertullian and Hegesippus. However, when Helvidius wrote a tract in 382 C.E. in defense of marriage, proposing that there was no evidence supporting the perpetual virginity of Mary, Jerome responded with a tract in 383 C.E. basically establishing a doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity.

By listing Jesus' brothers, familiarity with Jesus' past is heightened. The village knows him and presumably filters his teachings through the familiarity, allowing them to dismiss those teachings—that's just the craftsman's son, what could he know?

The story emphasizes that if people truly listen to and hear Jesus' teachings, then the rest will all be sorted out.

Summary

I think I have cover way too much in this session to attempt a summary. I'll just let it stand and answer your questions from my gaps in this session.

End Session V