MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

by

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Introduction

Matthew has appeared as the first of the four gospels as far back in Christian history as we can trace it.[1] In the post-apostolic writings of the church from the early 2nd century on, Matthew is quoted and alluded to by various of the early church fathers, and indeed, the early writers seem to give Matthew pride of place among the four evangelists. In Syriac there exists an early treatise describing a conference at Rome in which the title "According to Matthew" was accepted in AD 119, and if this record is authentic, then the commonly known title has been attached to the 1st gospel ever since.[2]

Matthew's Gospel is an admirable bridge between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament inasmuch as it seems to have been composed with a sustained interest in portraying Jesus in the context of Judaism. The gospel does not explain, for instance, Jewish customs and words as does Mark, thus suggesting that the author knew his readers would be familiar with them. Also, Matthew consistently uses the circumlocution "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God", a rabbinical device familiar to the Jews.[3] Papias (early 2nd century) states that Matthew was composed "in the Hebrew [Aramaic] language", Origen adds that Matthew was composed for "converts from Judaism", and Eusebius says that Matthew "preached to the Hebrews".[4] The context of the latter half of the first century was a period in

[1] The Muratorian Fragment, which contains the earliest canon list of the New Testament (ca. AD late 2nd century), is damaged at the top, but it lists Luke as the "third" and John as the "fourth" gospel. Presumably, Matthew and Mark were the "first" and "second", and this order was followed by such early writers as Irenaeus and Origen as well as in most of our earliest copies of the Greek New Testament.

[2] While the historicity of this source is debated, the the information concerning Matthew is probably authentic, cf. B. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 525-526.

[3] Out of reverence, the Jews avoided directly using the name of God by substituting something with which God was associated, cf. O. Evans, *IDB* (1962) III.18.

[4] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.xxiv.6; 3.xxxix.15; 6.xxv.4. While there is no textual evidence of Matthew's gospel in Hebrew/Aramaic, and some scholars doubt this testimony altogether, it is possible that the phrase *Hebraidi dialekto* (= Hebrew language) may mean Matthew was written in a Hebrew rhetorical style rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic itself, cf. S. McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 527.

which it was becoming more and more apparent that Christianity and Judaism, though rooted in a common past, would grow farther and farther apart in the future. This was only natural in that the followers of Jesus claimed messiahship for one whom the larger Jewish community rejected. After the Jewish revolt in the 60s, the breach widened even more. Judaism became more narrow in that the Pharisaic tradition is the only one of the several Jewish traditions to survive, while Christianity already had found an alternative to the temple-centered practice of faith. Matthew's Gospel, written in the midst of this theological debate, presents the Christian perspective of Jesus but with a decidedly Jewish flavor.

Who was Matthew?

Since the post-apostolic church, the 1st gospel has been credited to Matthew, the tax-gatherer, one of the original twelve apostles. As straightforward as this seems, the picture is somewhat more complicated. In the first place, none of the gospels, unlike, for instance, the letters of Paul, contains within its own text a citation of its author. Whether or not the gospels first circulated with titles is simply unknown. To be sure, it is a convention of scholarship to say that the gospels circulated anonymously until about AD 125, when titles were fixed and accepted, but this is no more than a scholarly guess, and there are good reasons for thinking that it may be wrong.[5] Further, other scholars have pointed out that the expression "according to Matthew" may mean nothing more than "according [to the teaching of] Matthew", and if so, the title may indicate something less than a direct inscription by Matthew himself. If Matthew used Mark's Gospel as a source, which is the majority opinion, then it seems peculiar that he should have copied Mark's account of his call instead of writing it first-hand. Hence, the discussion about Matthew's role as the witness behind the 1st gospel has been extended.

Historical-critical scholars are inclined to doubt that Matthew personally wrote the gospel bearing his name, but rather, that it was composed by a second generation Christian(s) in Matthew's community using Mark's Gospel, a hypothetical sayings source called "Q", and other unique material (Proto-Matthew) that may well have come from Matthew himself. If so, it was written as a theological and pastoral response to a crisis of identity in the community, probably in Antioch, Syria, after the loss of both Peter and Paul as well as the Jerusalem Church in the aftermath of the

[5] To discuss this issue at length here is beyond the scope of this study, but the reader may wish to consult M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (ET, London: SCM, 1985), pp. 64-84.

1st Jewish Revolt.[6] Such speculation notwithstanding, and even if the logic of these circumstances is accepted, it still is not unreasonable to think that Matthew's witness stands behind this gospel. To be sure, some questions remain unresolved, but Matthew as the author is the unanimous tradition passed on by the early church, and it should not be discounted lightly.

If it be accepted that the Matthew who wrote the gospel is the Matthew the church has long-accepted as its author, what do we know of him personally? Only a few things, actually. His Greek name, *Matthaios*, is a transliteration of the Aramaic *matta'y*, deriving from the noun *mattan* (= gift). The parallel accounts in Mark and Luke give his name as Levi bar Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27, 29), and one educated guess is that Matthew was a Christian moniker, while Levi was his given name. He was a tax-gatherer, a local official responsible for customs on commercial goods transported through Capernaum on the Damascus-Palestine road (Mt. 9:9; 10:3). As such, he probably was not well-liked by his Galilean fellows. Presumably he was well-to-do, since he staged a large dinner party for Jesus after his call which was attended by other tax-gatherers and probably avoided by more discriminating Jews (Lk. 5:29). Of course, he was one of the Twelve (Mt. 10:3//Mk. 3:18//Lk. 6:15; Ac. 1:13), and therefore, was almost certainly Jewish.

How, When and Where was the 1st Gospel Composed?

The current reigning literary theory—and it must be stressed that while this theory makes sense, it cannot be historically verified—is that Matthew was composed by using Mark's Gospel as its core to which were added sayings from a hypothetical "Q" (material that also appears in Luke) along with special material unique to Matthew. This theory is based broadly on the matching chronology between Matthew, Mark and Luke as well as the close verbal agreement between these three gospels when they are parallel. Matthew reproduces some 90% of Mark, much of it verbatim. If both Matthew and Luke made use of Mark, they never agree against the order of Mark (i.e., when Luke departs from Mark's chronology, Matthew continues to follow Mark; when Matthew departs from Mark's chronology, Luke continues to follow Mark). Though some scholars have suggested that Matthew was written earlier and that Mark abridged Matthew's account, this theory has not won wide acceptance. The working hypothesis of most

[6] R. Brown, *Antioch & Rome* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 45-72.

scholars is that Mark is the earliest gospel and Matthew, written perhaps a decade or so later, uses Mark as his starting point.

If the above hypothesis is accepted, then the dating of Matthew depends upon the dating of Mark; if Matthew used Mark, then Matthew must be later than Mark. Mark's Gospel, by earliest attestation, was composed as the testimony of Simon Peter. It usually is assumed to be around the time of Peter's death, which occurred in about the mid-60s, though this assumption also is fraught with uncertainty, since some early testimony puts it during the ministry of Peter.[7] The usually suggested date for Mark's composition is about AD 65 (after Peter's death), and the usually suggested date for Matthew's composition is about AD 85, assuming enough time for Mark to have been copied and circulated throughout the early Christian communities. However, this scenario can only be followed by discounting altogether the testimony of Irenaeus, who believed Matthew to have been composed during Peter's lifetime, that is, in the early 60s, and by also discounting the testimony of Clement, who believed Mark to have been composed during Peter's lifetime as well. At the end of the day, we simply do not know. Unless the tradition of the early church if thrown out entirely, Matthew probably should not be dated later than AD 85, but it might well have been composed as early as the early 60s.[8]

As to the place of origin, we are without any specific tradition. However, since Matthew has a particularly Jewish orientation, a view that is generally accepted by all, then it seems not unlikely that it would have originated in the eastern Mediterranean if not Palestine itself. Most scholars today cautiously follow Streeter's lead in suggesting Antioch, Syria, which had a large Jewish community.[9] Other possibilities might be Alexandria or Caesarea or Pella.[10]

Structure

Several models for an underlying structure of Matthew's Gospel have been proposed. The oldest and simplest is geographical and biographical,

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[7] Early traditions are not easy to reconcile with current literary theory or even each other. Irenaeus seems to put the composition of Mark after Peter's death, but he puts the composition of Matthew during Peter's lifetime, thus making Matthew earlier than Mark, cf. *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1. Eusebius cites Clement of Alexandria as saying that Mark was composed during Peter's lifetime, not after his death *Ecclesiastical History*, 6. xiv.6-7.

[8] See the extensive discussion in R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 599-609.

[9] Streeter, pp. 500-527.

[10] R. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989), pp. 91-95.

that is, Matthew arranged his materials according to the chronological progress of Jesus' life and ministry:

Birth Narratives (1-2)
Preparation for Ministry (3:1—4:11)
Public Ministry in Galilee (4:12—15:20)
Ministry in the Environs of Galilee (15:21—18:35)
Journey to Jerusalem (19:1—20:34)
Last Days of Jesus' Life (21:1—28:20)

By the early 20th century, more attention began to be given to the importance of internal literary markers, where repeating phrases denoted literary shifts. One such set of possible markers was the repeating phrase, "When Jesus had finished saying these things…" (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). This approach seemed to divided the book into alternating narratives and discourses, and a popular model was developed that followed a fivefold topical structure with an introduction and epilogue. It even was believed by some to be a deliberate counterpart to the fivefold division of the Pentateuch:

Birth Narrative (1-2)
Book 1: Concerning Discipleship (3:1—7:29)
Book 2: Concerning Apostleship (8:1—11:1)
Book 3: Concerning Hiding Revelation (11:2—13:53)
Book 4: Concerning Church Administration (13:54—19:1a)
Book 5: Concerning the Judgment (19:1b—26:2)
Epilogue (16:3—28:20)

In each of these settings, Jesus is depicted in a teaching motif, either as sitting or as surrounded by disciples or as sought out the by the crowds.

Another approach based on similar internal markers focused on the phrase "From that time on Jesus began to…" (4:17; 16:21). If these were given priority, then Matthew falls into three major divisions:

The Person of Jesus the Christ (1:1—4:16)
The Proclamation of Jesus the Christ (4:17—16:20)
The Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ (16:21—28:20)

With a more general recognition of Hebrew chiastic poetic structure, yet another pattern was suggested with the Jewish rejection of Jesus and the parables of the kingdom as the central feature.

A ***Narrative:*** *Birth and preparation (1:1—4:17)*

B ***Discourse:*** *Jesus teaches with authority (4:18—7:29)*
- ***C*** ***Narrative:*** *Jesus acts with authority—ten miracles (8:1—9:35)*
- ***D*** ***Discourse****: The Twelve are commissioned with authority (9:36—11:1)*
  - ***E*** ***Narrative:*** *Jesus' invitation is rejected (11:2—12:50)*
    - ***F*** ***Discourse:*** *Parables of the kingdom (13:1-53)*
  - ***E'*** ***Narrative:*** *Jesus opposed and confessed (13:54—16:20)*
- ***D'*** ***Discourse:*** *(The disciples' misunderstand the passion (16:21—20:34)*
- ***C'*** ***Narrative:*** *Jesus' authority questioned in Jerusalem (21:1—22:46)*

B' ***Discourse:*** *Judgment on Israel and false prophets (23:1—25:456)*
A' ***Narrative:*** *Passion, death and resurrection (26:1—28:20)*

Whether any of the above attempts to discern structure in Matthew are entirely successful—or more to the point, whether any in Matthew's community would have had the literary sophistication to see them—is a moot question. Still, the alternating pattern of narrative and discourse seems to be a deliberate and prominent feature. Perhaps Dick France is correct in saying that Matthew is more on the order of a drama in which the narratives and discourses function to develop the plot toward its climax.[11] In any case, the progress of the gospel and its network of narratives and discourses can be followed by the modern reader without difficulty:

Birth Narratives (1-2)
John the Baptist Narratives (3)
Temptation Narratives (4)
Sermon on the Mount (5-7)
Galilean Ministry (8-9)
Mission of the Twelve (10)
Conflict Narratives (11-12)
Parables of the Kingdom (13)
More Ministry in Galilee (14-15)
The Turning Point (16-17)
Sermon on Offense, Disciple and Forgiveness (18)
Ministry in Judea and Perea (19-22)
Sermon on the Fall of the Temple (23-25)
Passion Narratives (26-27)
Resurrection Narratives (28)

Central Theological Motifs

Matthew's Gospel contains over sixty explicit quotations from the Old Testament (usually from the Septuagint) and many more allusions. In keeping with his Jewish context, Matthew emphasized that in Jesus the Old Testament

[11] R. France, pp. 149-160.

was fulfilled (1:22-23; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:3, 15; 4:14-16; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 26:56). Matthew's use of the term πληροω (= fulfill, fill, make full, bring to completion) is much broader than merely prediction and verification, however. His use of the Old Testament often does not depend upon a simple historical-grammatical reading of the texts, but rather, a *sensus plenior* (= fuller sense; i.e., a deeper or fuller sense than originally intended by the ancient authors at the time they wrote). Such fulfillment can include the simple historical-grammatical sense, of course, and sometimes Matthew seems to read texts in just this way (e.g., 2:5-6; cf. Mic. 5:2), but his method also includes the clarification of enigmatic Old Testament passages, where ambiguities in the Hebrew Bible are brought directly to bear upon the life of Jesus (e.g., 22:41-46; cf. Ps. 110:1). It also includes an interchange between the nation and Jesus as its "true" representative (e.g., 2:15; cf. Ho. 11:1). In the highest sense of the word, Jesus was the "true" Israel, God's firstborn Son (3:17; 17:5; cf. Ex. 4:22-23)! Matthew's concept of fulfillment further includes the recapitulation of Old Testament events in New Testament forms (e.g., 2:17-18; cf. Je. 31:15).[12] What happened once could happen again, or what happened in an ancient form could be reproduced typologically in a later form—and these, also, are fulfillments. In all these ways and more, Matthew demonstrates a deep commitment to the Hebrew Bible as the Word of God, but especially, as a word that points beyond itself to the future. That future came in the appearance of Jesus.

In spite of what some might call his "preoccupation" with Israel, however, Matthew carefully points out the universal implications of the gospel that extend beyond the Jewish community. In his genealogy of Jesus, for instance, he listed four gentile women (1:3, 5, 6). He described eastern magi (2:1), a Roman soldier (8:5-13), and a Canaanite woman (15:22-28), all of whom, in one way or another, came to faith in Jesus. Other references, also, point toward this universalism (8:11-12; 12:18-21), not the least of which is the Great Commission itself (28:19). Though much of Jesus' public ministry is depicted in Galilee, it is a "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15), and much of his ministry spreads beyond Galilee into Syria and the Gentile Decapolis (4:24-25). It was presumably the Gentile crowds who "praised the God of Israel" (15:31) and among whom he also multiplied loaves and fishes (15:32-39). In the end, the mission of the disciples was to preach the message of Jesus "throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (24:14; cf. 26:13). So, while Matthew's theology moves in Jewish circles, it certainly does not

[12] R. Longenecker, "Who is the Prophet Talking About?" *Themelios* (Oct/Nov 1987), pp. 4-8.

end there. Rather, the mission of Jesus was to the world, and it is to the world that this gospel would be proclaimed.

The Text of Matthew

Portions of Matthew's Gospel are attested by seventeen papyri texts, some of them quite early. Papyri, because of their biodegradable character, tend to be incomplete, but very early fragments include $\mathfrak{p}^1$ (Mt. 1:1-9, 12, 14-20: 3rd century), $\mathfrak{p}^{35}$ (Mt. 25:12-15, 20-23: 4th century), $\mathfrak{p}^{45}$ (Mt. 20:24-32; 21:13-19; 25:41—26:39: 3rd century), $\mathfrak{p}^{64/67}$ (Mt. 3:9, 15; 5:20-22, 25-28; 26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31-33: about AD 200), $\mathfrak{p}^{70}$ (Mt. 2:13-16; 2:22—3:1; 11:26-27; 12:4-5; 24:3-6, 12-15: 3rd century) and $\mathfrak{p}^{71}$ (Mt. 19:10-11, 17-18: 4th century).[13] Most important, the complete text of Matthew also is attested in many early uncial texts, such as, **א** (4th century), **A** (5th century), and **B** (fourth century), among others.[14]

The Birth Narratives (1-2)

The Genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17)

When one compares the genealogies of Matthew with those of 1 Chronicles 1:34; 2:1-15; 3:1, 5, 10-24, it becomes apparent that they are not identical. Matthew divides his genealogy into three symmetrical groups of fourteen generations each, something not found in the Old Testament. The first set of fourteen generations are identical between Matthew and the Old Testament. The second set apparently has been abridged by Matthew in order to achieve his number.

In the final group, it is unclear as to how Matthew arrives at the number fourteen, though he obviously intends this to be the case (cf. 1:17). It may be that David is counted twice or that Jeconiah is counted twice. Alternatively, if one is to avoid repeating a name, it may be that Mary is counted in the third group, thus alluding to the two different kinds of generation for Jesus, one legal (Joseph) and one natural (Mary).

The reasoning behind the three symmetrical periods of fourteen generations each is not immediately clear to the modern reader. One popular

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[13] P. Comfort, *Early Manuscripts and Translations of the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), pp. 32-62, 78.

[14] K. and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, trans. E. Rhodes (Grand Rapids/Leiden: Eerdmans/Brill, 1987), p. 239.

idea is that the number fourteen was derived by *gematria*, a symbolic way of expressing an idea through the numerical value of alphabetical letters. If so, then the number fourteen emphasizes that Jesus was of the family of David, since the numerical equivalent of the name David in Hebrew is fourteen. This is probably the best solution.[15]

The historical demarcations of the three sets is also suggestive. To Abraham was given the first covenant, which gave Israel a special place in the purposes of God (Ge. 12:1-3). To David, also, was given a profound covenant that his throne would be established forever (2 Sa. 7:16). In the days of exile, both the promises to Abraham and David were jeopardized because the nation lost its land and its Davidic king. From a theological viewpoint, Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) was the last legitimate king of David's line in Judah before the exile. The way in which Matthew structures this genealogy suggests that this latter period of jeopardy is now complete. God has acted to fulfill his promises to Abraham and David.

Above all, of course, are the highly suggestive titles "son of David" and "son of Abraham". The significance of the latter is obvious, for it places Jesus squarely in the nation of Israel as among the seed to whom the promises were originally made. The term "son of David" had become a virtual synonym for messiah by the time of Jesus, based on Yahweh's promise to David that his throne would be established forever (2 Sa. 7:16).

One other striking feature of Matthew's genealogy must not be passed over, the listing of the four women in addition to Mary herself. The appearance of a woman in a Jewish genealogy was not unprecedented, but it was rare, being found usually in those cases where there was an irregularity of descent or where there was something significant about the woman's name.[16] In the first place, all four were considered to be Gentiles. Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, was probably Canaanite (Ge. 38:2, 6). Rahab was a native of Canaanite Jericho (Jos. 2:1). Ruth was a Moabitess (Ru. 1:4). Bathsheba married Uriah, a Hittite (2 Sa. 11:3), and while there is no direct information regarding her nationality, it is significant that Matthew never calls her by name but emphasizes the gentile connection by calling her "Uriah's wife". This non-Jewish character of the four women seems to fit into Matthew's larger theological scheme that the message about Jesus was international.

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[15] Before Arabic numerals came into usage, letters of the alphabet served as numbers, and thus words had a numerical equivalent. The numerical equivalent of the Hebrew name "David" (*daleth/waw/daleth* = 4 + 6 + 4) is fourteen, and if this hypothesis is correct, then the genealogy gives a triple emphasis that Jesus was of the family of David, cf. F. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1981), p. 61.

[16] J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 207 (note 1).

The other striking feature about these women is that, like Mary, there was some irregularity in the procreation of their offspring. All four of these women found themselves outside the normal patriarchal structures of ancient society, and all four were restored or brought under the protection of God's providential care. The mention of these four women seems designed to suggest to the reader that Mary, the fifth woman in the story, would also suffer alienation from society but would come under the protection of God in giving birth to her child under unusual circumstances.

The Virginal Conception of Jesus (Mt. 1:18-25)

In the genealogy proper, Matthew has not told his readers who fathered Jesus, but now he addresses this question specifically. Marriage was completed in two stages, a betrothal and a hometaking. Between the betrothal and the hometaking Mary was found to be pregnant. Joseph was left to figure the problem out for himself, and he could only conclude the worst. He knew the child was not his, and seemingly the only other options were seduction and rape. Thus, Joseph resolved to divorce Mary privately rather than publicly expose her.

The two expressions δειγματίσαι (= to publicly expose) and λάθρα ἀπολῦσαι (= secretly divorce) are significant in that they suggest that Joseph considered both seduction and rape as possible causes of Mary's pregnancy. Rabbinic sources are not as clear as one might like regarding how the Jews approached the subject at the time of Jesus. Apparently, the judicial ordeal described in Number 5:11-31 could be declined and a divorce could be effected privately before two witnesses.[17] Being a "righteous" man (a man devoted to Torah), Joseph struggled with the alternatives, finally choosing private divorce in order to spare Mary the worst.

In the midst of his acute dilemma, God intervened to change Joseph's mind. Joseph was counseled not to be afraid of completing the home-taking. Of course, to complete the marriage meant that he would be called upon to bear Mary's stigma. It meant that while he was willing to protect her from the overt charges of seduction or rape, he could never remove any popular suspicion that seduction or rape had actually occurred nor could he exempt himself from being suspected of intercourse prior to the home-taking.

The divine action that resulted in Mary's pregnancy is explained by the phrase, "...what is conceived in her is through the Holy Spirit." Virtually all scholars agree that this passage intends to teach the virginal conception of Jesus. After the birth, Joseph was instructed to name the child "Jesus",

[17] Schaberg, p. 51.

which normally would take place at the circumcision, eight days after the birth.

The name "Jesus" was common enough in Jewry, since it was the Greek equivalent to the Old Testament name "Joshua".[18] The name was of great significance to Matthew because of its theological meaning. The equivalents *Iesous* (Greek), *Yeshua* (Aramaic), and *Yehoshua* (Hebrew) may be traced etymologically to the combination of the short form of the name Yahweh (= *Yah*) with the Hebrew *hiphil* verb *hoshi'a* (= to save), and means "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation". Theologically, the name "Jesus" recalls the promise in the Old Testament that "He [Yahweh] himself will redeem Israel from all their sins" (Ps. 130:8).

Matthew's first fulfillment passage goes back to a distinctive section of the Book of Isaiah, sometimes called the "Book of Immanuel" (Is. 7:1-l2:6), because of the centrality of the Immanuel figure (7:14; 8:8, 10). It was in connection with Isaiah's message to trust in God's protection that Isaiah instructed Ahaz to ask for a sign that would confirm the promised divine security (Is. 7:10-11). Ahaz refused under the guise of pseudo-humility (Is. 7:12). Yahweh was angered at this impudence and gave a sign anyway, a historical sign that a maiden[19] would give birth to a son and would name him Immanuel (Is. 7:13-14).

The name means "God with us", a reflection of the divine promise to protect Ahaz if he would put his faith in Yahweh (Is. 7:4, 7-9). The Immanuel sign to Ahaz was double-edged; it was a sign of protection on the one hand (7:16), but a sign of judgment on the other (7:16-25). This double-edged character is reflected in the two names given to the sign-child. Not only was he to be called Immanuel (= God with us), he also was to be called Maher-shalal-hash-baz (= the spoil hastens, the plunder comes quickly, cf. Is. 8:1-2). The predicted sign came to pass when a son was born, and at the time of the birth, the word of Yahweh confirmed to Isaiah that this son was indeed the promised sign (Is. 8:3-4, 18).

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[18] Joshua ben Nun of the OT is *Iesous* (Jesus) in the LXX, and in at least two references in the Greek NT, Joshua is referred to in this same way (Ac. 7:45; He. 4:8).

[19] A tremendous amount of discussion has been given to the Hebrew word עלמה (*'alma*) rendered either "virgin" (ASV, RSVmg, NIV, NAB, NASB) or "young woman" (RSV, ASVmg, NEB, NASBmg). The word probably refers to a girl of marriageable age, cf. Holladay, p. 274; *BDB*, p. 761. However, the word itself is not as precise in meaning as one might hope or as precise as the English translations might seem to suggest. There are a few scholars who contend that it must necessarily mean "virgin", cf. A. Macrae, "1630," *TWOT*, ed. Harris, Archer, Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2.672. However, the evidence is very slim, and the conclusion of Youngblood is probably the most honest, that is, "The most that can be said of *'alma* is that in all of its OT occurrences it seems to be used of an unmarried woman, a 'damsel' which, in situations such as the one before us, carries with it a strong presumption in favor of virginity," R. Youngblood, "Immanuel," *ISBE* (1982) 2.807.

Over 700 years later, Matthew saw a prophetic connection between the prediction of a sign-child given by Isaiah to Ahaz and the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus "made full" the word of Yahweh given to Isaiah about the Immanuel child. Matthew seems to be using the term πληρόω (= to fulfill) in the sense of recapitulation. Since Jesus was born miraculously "of the Holy Spirit", he was Immanuel in the fullest sense of the word—not merely God invisibly among us (to protect and judge us), but God visibly among us (to save us from sin)!

Joseph's dream was decisive! He immediately completed the hometaking, just as he had been instructed by the angel. However, as Matthew is careful to point out, Joseph did not have intercourse with Mary until after the birth.[20]

The Visit of the Magi (Mt. 2:1-12)

The precise time of the birth is unknown, though most scholars fix the year at about 5 or 4 BC.[21] During this period Magi came from the East to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born king of the Jews. The term μαγοι (= magi, astrologers) is not easy to identify with precision. The term loosely covered those who interpreted signs and dreams, were specialists in astrology, and were practitioners of magic. That they came from "the East" is also a very general designation, though Babylon in Mesopotamia is not unlikely as the place of their origin. In Babylon, they would have had direct contact with the scholarly Jewish Diaspora and the rabbinic messianic interpretation of Numbers 24:17. Spurred on by astrological calculations which were connected with the Jewish expectation of a kingly figure, they came searching.

For Matthew, the significance of the Magi lay not in their astrological abilities but in their pagan origin. The questions the Magi asked in Jerusalem suggest that they were not Hebrews, and it appears that they had come from far away. The wonder, mystery, and reverence of these gentiles clearly fits with the universalism of Matthew's gospel.

The arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem with news of a newly born king deeply disturbed Herod. The last decade of Herod's reign had been very troubled. He was getting old, and there was much infighting among his sons

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[20] While the expression ἕως (= until) does not require that Joseph and Mary engaged in marital relations after the birth of Jesus, it strongly suggests as much, contra J. McKenzie, "Matthew," JBC (1968) 2.67. In any case, the Roman Catholic tradition of the eternal virginity of Mary has no biblical support, and Matthew implies just the opposite.

[21] For a concise discussion of the reasons, see H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 11-25.

and by his various wives, each hoping to succeed him. Herod made careful inquiries as to the predicted location of the Messiah's birth from the leading priests and the experts in Torah and Jewish oral law, possibly appealing to the entire Sanhedrin since he uses the term πας (= all). Their response was that the prophet indicated Bethlehem, David's ancestral city (cf. Jn. 7:41-42). Matthew even quotes for his readers the Old Testament passage, and he closes the quotation by conflating it with a phrase from yet another passage referring to David's kingship (Mic. 5:2; 2 Sa. 5:2).

After hearing their views, Herod privately conferred with the Magi about the time when they first observed the star. His expressed desire to worship the newborn king was no more than a ploy. That he did not intend to trust the Magi to find the child is evident in that he did not even send with them an escort. Rather, he now possessed the two important pieces of information that he needed to carry out a terrible purge…the place of the birth and the time of the birth.

When the Magi left Herod, the star that they had originally seen when they were still in their homelands once more appeared to them. It is traditional that the Magi "followed the star" all the way from the east to Bethlehem, but this is not strictly according to the biblical text, since the star apparently was not visible to them during their journey from the east. They came to Jerusalem, no doubt, because as the capital it was the natural place for a king to be born. It was only upon leaving Jerusalem, however, that the star reappeared to them once more.

When they finally arrived, they worshiped Jesus, the child of Mary. The expensive gifts[22] were providential in that Joseph would shortly need them to finance a trip to Egypt.

The Flight to Egypt (2:13-18)

After the Magi had begun their journey home, Joseph received his second dream warning him to flee to Egypt. There was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, a metropolitan city that had burgeoned to half a million people by 60 BC.[23] Joseph's flight to Egypt was immediate, and he left the same night he was forewarned.

The stay in Egypt also made full another Old Testament statement so that Matthew can say that the prophet's words were "fulfilled". The original

[22]The value of gold needs no comment. Frankincense was a gum extracted from trees growing in southern Arabia and India, a substance with a strong balsamic odor when heated and valued for fumigation and embalming, cf. R. Harrison, "Frankincense," *ISBE* (1982) 2.360. Myrrh was a valuable resinous perfume, also extracted from shrubs in Arabia and Ethiopia, which was compounded with oil and used for perfuming clothes and general deodorant purposes, R. Harrison, "Myrrh," *ISBE* (1986) 3.450-451.

[23] J. Thompson, "Alexandria," *ISBE* (1979) 1.89-94.

statement by Hosea was not a prediction: it clearly refers backward to the account of the exodus (Ho. 11:1) where the nation Israel was described as God's son (Ex. 4:22-23). Drawing from this imagery, Hosea recalls that Egypt was the place from which this "son", God's national people, began the trek toward Canaan. Matthew's allusion to the passage in connection with the childhood of Jesus is far from arbitrary. Just as the nation Israel found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Canaan to fulfill its calling, so Jesus also found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Palestine to fulfill his.[24]

In the sense of solidarity, Jesus summed up in his life all that Israel was called to be. He was the true Israel. Like Israel in her forty year sojourn in the desert, Jesus was driven into the desert for forty days. Just as Israel's mission was to dispossess the Canaanites in holy war, so Jesus' mission was to vanquish the powers of Satan in his life, death and resurrection. Just as Israel suffered exile and abandonment from Yahweh, so Jesus experienced the reality of abandonment on the cross. Just as Israel was called back from exile into a new existence, so Jesus was resurrected from the dead by the Father. Paul, as well as the gospel writers, saw this same kind of implied link between the exodus events and the life of Jesus (1 Co. 10:1-4).

Once more, Matthew explains a prophetic connection with the Old Testament. Rachel, the ancient mother of the Benjamite tribe in the southern nation of Judah and the ancient grandmother of Ephraim, the primary tribe in the northern nation of Israel during the divided monarchy (Ge. 30:22-24; 41:50-52), was depicted by Jeremiah in a poetic metaphor as a ghostly weeping mother, bewailing the tragic loss of her children in exile (Je. 31:15). In a profound recapitulation of that ancient description, Matthew saw once again the weeping figure of Rachel, this time not because of exile but because of Herod's treachery.

The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

Herod died in 4 BC, and his death prepared the way for Joseph to return to his homeland. Once more in a dream, Joseph was told that it was time to leave Egypt and to return to Israel (cf. 2:13b). Apparently, Joseph had hoped to settle in Judea, but when he heard that Archelaus reigned there, he was fearful to stay. Herod's jurisdiction had been divided among his three sons, Archelaus receiving Judea, Samaria and Idumea, Herod Antipas receiving Galilee and Perea, and Herod Phillip receiving Gaulanitis, Auranitis, Batanea, Trachonitis, Paneas and Ituraea, the regions north and east of Galilee.[25] Afraid to stay in Judea, Joseph continued north, being directed in

[24] D. Kider, *Love to the Loveless: The Message of Hosea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), pp. 100-102.
[25] H. Hoehner, "Herod," *ISBE* (1982) 2.694-696.

yet another dream, until he eventually reached Galilee. Here he settled in his previous home town of Nazareth (Lk. 1:26-27). The settlement in Nazareth became yet another fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Matthew's allusion to the statement, "He shall be called a Nazarene," is unusual in two respects. First, unlike his previous fulfillments, he refers to the Old Testament prophets in the plural, a fact that seems to infer that he is not thinking of one particular Old Testament passage but to several passages. Second, there is no Old Testament quotation that corresponds to the statement in 2:23b. Matthew's meaning in this fulfillment passage is far from clear, but among several interpretations,[26] a couple are worth examination.

One is that the term "Nazarene" is a pejorative name, used as an insult (cf. Jn. 1:46; of. 7:42, 52). Christians were later called Nazarenes in this same pejorative fashion (Ac. 24:5), and in fact, Christians are still known as "Nazarenes" in the Jewish Talmud. The earliest known usage of the term in a pejorative sense in Hebrew occurs in the *birkat ha-minim* (the curse upon heretics) which was adopted in Jewish synagogue liturgies in the late 1st century.[27] As such, Matthew may only be saying that Jesus' residence in Nazareth would climax in rejection, a rejection that is predicted in several Old Testament passages (cf. Ps. 22: 6-8, 13, 16-18; 69:8, 20-21; Is. 49:7; 53:2-3, 7-8; Da. 9:26).[28]

Another possibility is that the fulfillment involves a type of word-play between the Greek form *Nazoraios* (= Nazarene) in Mt. 2:23 and the Hebrew term *netser* (= branch) in Is. 11:1. The passage in Isaiah is clearly messianic, and some regard it as a double entendre, referring both to the "branch" who would become messiah as well as to the one who would come from Nazareth.[29] If this interpretation is adopted, the fulfillment would fall under the category of clarifying an Old Testament ambiguity. On the whole, however, this solution seems less satisfactory than the previous one.

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[26] For a survey of other treatments, see R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 207-213, 223-225.

[27] F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 465.

[28] D. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.97.

[29] E. Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 202; D. Wallace, "Nazarene," *ISBE* (1986) 3.500.

The Beginnings of Ministry (3-4)

John the Baptist (3:1-12)

The span of time between Jesus' childhood and the beginning of his ministry is passed over by all the evangelists (with the exception of a single incident in Luke's account). This is not as unusual as might be supposed, since the evangelists are not attempting to write biographies of Jesus. Rather, their focus, pure and simple, was on his ministry as the Messiah. That ministry began in the context of ministry by another key figure, John the Baptist. John is also known to us from the writings of Flavius Josephus, who recounts that John baptized people as a bodily parallel to inward cleansing and describes Herod's execution of John at the fortress of Machaerus.[30]

It is in Matthew's description of John's preaching that the reader first encounters the critical phrase "kingdom of heaven" (3:1).[31] By this designation, both John and Jesus (cf. 4:17 and following) will use this phrase to describe the eschatological rule of God that was even then breaking into the present age. The kingdom was "near"! Both the Old Testament prophets and Jewish Apocalyptic anticipated a time when God would be King over the whole earth. Popular expectation was that this kingdom would come abruptly with the climax of the old age and the commencement of a new age. As Matthew's gospel progresses, it will become clear that Jesus preached both a present in-breaking of God's kingdom in a partial and hidden way as well as an eschatological climax, thus deviating from popular Jewish expectation.[32] John understood himself to be a parallel to the ancient "voice in the desert" that once called the Jewish exiles from Babylon back to their homeland (3:3; cf. Is. 40:3). Just as this desert "voice" preceded the divine act of allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem, so also, now John was a "voice" preceding the divine act of allowing Israel to return to its true home—God's kingdom, his rule over the whole earth! As a symbol of his prophetic office, John mimicked the clothing of Elijah (3:4; cf. 2 Kg. 1:8), and indeed, later Jesus will imply that John fulfilled the prophecy about the return of Elijah (cf. 17:10-13; Mal. 4:5).

John's ministry produced quite a sensation, and people came from

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[30] *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.2.

[31] The term "kingdom of [the] heaven[s]" is a circumlocution for "kingdom of God", the word "heaven" functioning as an alternative to "God" due to Jewish sensitivities (cf. 1QSb3.5). While early dispensationalists (e.g., Scofield) attempted to distinguish between the kingdom of heaven in Matthew and the kingdom of God in Mark and Luke, this approach has no exegetical basis, and even most dispensationalists have given it up.

[32] For a full treatment of the kingdom in both its present and future aspects, see G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

everywhere to be baptized by him as a sign of repentance and preparation for God's rule (3:5-6)! Baptism, of course, already was known to the Jewish people as a ritual of cleansing, and the fact that John baptized in the Jordan conformed to the expectation that baptisms be performed in running water.[33] Representatives from the Pharisees and Sadducees came to watch, and John denounced them as insincere hypocrites (3:7-10).[34] In fact, John's scorching words, "Do not think to say…we have Abraham as our father," was a frontal assault on the generally accepted notion that the people of God were to be defined by pedigree. Rather, John preached that God was unbound by the conventions of ancestry, and if there were not a sincere turning toward God, the divine ax would severe the unfruitful limbs and prepare them for burning! Isaiah had referred to Abraham as the "quarry from which you were hewn" (Is. 51:1-2), but John said God could raise up other stones as well!

In particular, John clearly defined his role as one of preparation for someone to come later (3:11). This coming one would inaugurate a flood of the Holy Spirit and judgment, cleaning out the barn floor of its useless straw while preserving the wheat (3:12). How much John explained his double image of a "baptism with the Spirit" and a "baptism with fire" is not stated, but the followers of Jesus would later understand the first image to have been fulfilled in the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost (cf. Ac. 1:5; 11:15-17). The second image seems to refer to the eschatological judgment.[35]

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[33] According to Jewish law, "drawn" water is impure, while "flowing" water is ritually pure (*Mikva'ot* 5.5). Hence, Jewish *miqva'ot* (baptismal pools) were constructed as double pools, a reserve pool for ritually pure water, and an immersion pool separated by a wall. A pipe connected the two pools for circulation. John's baptism in the Jordan, therefore, conformed to the current rabbinic expectations for flowing water, cf. W. La Sor, "Discovering What Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1987), pp. 52-59.

[34] Of the four major religious sects described by Flavius Josephus (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes, cf. *Antiquities* 18.1.1-6), only the first three are mentioned by Matthew. The Pharisees were middle-class teachers whose spiritual ancestry went back to the Hasidim following the Maccabean Revolt. They were champions of the Torah, stubbornly resistant to Hellenism, and maintained belief in an oral Torah with equal authority to the written Torah. Their environment was largely the synagogues, and because of their devotion to the Torah, they often were associated with the Scribes (copiests of Scriptures). They anticipated the coming of God's rule over the world, and they believed that Torah-intensification was the means to usher it in. The Sadducees, by contrast, were the wealthy aristocracy, most of them priests in Jerusalem, who did not recognize the binding authority of the so-called oral Torah (though they formally upheld the authority of the written Torah). Their environment was the temple. They were more open to Hellenism than their Pharisaic counterparts, and they were less eager for an apocalyptic kingdom, since they found considerable room to maintain their lifestyle under Roman occupation, cf. D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), pp. 48-53 and N. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 181-203, 209-213.

[35] Though some have attempted to connect the "baptism with fire" to the tongues of fire at Pentecost (cf. Ac. 2:3), the context of Matthew's following comments in 3:12 militates against such an interpretation.

Jesus' Baptism (3:13-17)

While all four gospels cite the event of Jesus' baptism under John's ministry, only Matthew offers a reason why, explaining John's initial reluctance and Jesus' explanation (3:13-15). Even so, Jesus' words "to fulfill all righteousness" are oblique to most readers. Clearly, Jesus traveled a long distance for the specific purpose of submitting to John's purification rite, but given the rest of the New Testament's theology about Jesus as sinless, the question naturally arises as to why he was baptized at all. Surely he had no need for personal repentance, and John just as clearly perceived Jesus' infinite moral superiority.

In the first place, Matthew uses his favorite linking word "fulfill", which usually bridges between the ancient Scriptures and the present event. Here, however, the fulfillment is not so much a prophetic completion as it is a completion of "righteousness". Hence, the critical interpretive factor is to understand what is entailed in this word righteousness. Some would have it that Jesus was baptized by proxy for the sins of the world, but nothing in the New Testament countenances even the possibility of such an idea. A much better approach is that in Matthew's theology the term "righteousness" concerns not so much legal correctness or "being good" as it does one's relationship to God focused in a life of obedience (cf. 5:6, 10, 20; 6:33). In other words, Jesus was baptized because he was an obedient Son to his Father. This interpretation accords well with the heavenly proclamation, "This is my Son…with him I am well pleased."[36]

The single most important feature of Jesus' baptism is not the act of baptism itself so much as the events that accompanied it—the descent of the Spirit like a dove and the proclamation from heaven of Jesus' sonship (3:16-17; cf. Ps. 2:7). Jesus, henceforth, will be the bearer of the Spirit, and his identity as God's unique Son will be emphasized throughout the gospel (cf. 4:3, 6; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16; 17:5; 24:36; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54).[37]

The Temptations (4:1-11)

In Jesus' temptations in the Judean wasteland, Matthew further develops his theme that Jesus was the true Israel. Just as God's ancient "son" passed through the wilderness of temptation for forty years (Ex. 4:22; Dt.

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[36] R. France, *The Gospel of Matthew [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 119-120.

[37] With respect to the self-consciousness of Jesus, some scholars have speculated as to whether or not this event was the moment *par excellence* when Jesus realized his special status, but Dunn is doubtless correct to say that this narrative is insufficient to answer such a question, cf. J. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 62-67.

8:2, 5), so now his true Son will experience the same test of faithfulness at the end of forty days of fasting.[38] That Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted" suggests that the initiative for this test lay with God, not Satan, even though the devil became the agent of temptation. The ground of the temptations are about Jesus' sonship, "If you are the Son of God…" (4:3, 6). If the tempter could convince Jesus that he needed to prove his sonship—which had just been declared by God from the heavens—he was a long step toward undermining Jesus' entire life of dependency upon the Father. The issue is whether this Son will wholly trust in his Father, or whether he will take matters into his own hands to reach his goals. Jesus responded to the first temptation with a direct quotation from Moses (Dt. 8:3).

In the second temptation—and it is unclear whether this may have been visionary or literal—the devil had Jesus stand upon the highest projecting point of the temple, which was about 180' above the courtyard below. This time the devil quoted scripture, appealing to Psalm 91:11-12, where the ancient poet acclaimed God's ability to protect. Jesus instinctively knew, however, that this was a ploy that could only be satisfied by wrong motives. In rebuttal, he once more quoted Moses (Dt. 6:16). Putting God to the test would not be an act of trust, but defiance.

At last, the devil took Jesus to a place where he could survey the glittering centers of world power. Here, Satan removed any attempt at disguise and boldly demanded that Jesus worship him. In short, this was a "short-cut" to the kingdom. If Jesus had come to usher in God's reign over the world, the devil suggested that it could be accomplished in one act of surrender—to him, the "god" of the age (cf. Lk. 4:6; Jn. 12:31; 2 Co. 4:4; 1 Jn. 5:19). This had been the perennial temptation for ancient Israel, who always seemed to succumb to the temptation to "be like the nations". Yet again, Jesus responded with the words of Moses in the desert (Dt. 6:13).

It is no accident that all of Jesus' refutations were drawn from Moses' discourse about ancient Israel's trek through the wilderness. A later writer would say that as the true Israel and the true Son, he "had to be made like his brothers in every way" (cf. He. 2:17-18). When this current series of temptations were finished, the devil departed (Luke adds "until an opportune time", cf. Lk. 4:13), and then the very angels Satan had tempted Jesus to call came to attend him.

[38] Jesus' forty-day fast also recalls Moses' similar fast when on Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex. 34:28).

Early Ministry in Galilee (4:12-25)

Later, Matthew will detail the reason behind John the Baptist's imprisonment (cf. 14:1-12), but here he simply notes the event that seemed to serve as a turning point for Jesus' return from Judea to Galilee (4:12). (John's Gospel narrates a number of events that may have happened before Jesus went back, but it is difficult to piece together the chronology with confidence.[39])This geographical shift, which included the notation that Jesus did not return to Nazareth, his home town, but to Capernaum, the busy lakeside city, was itself a fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction of a dawning light to the Galileans (4:13-16; cf. Is. 9:1-2), a prediction that began with blessing in Galilee and climaxed with the Davidic king reigning on David's throne (Is. 9:3-7). Originally, Isaiah's expression "Galilee of the Gentiles" was given from the perspective of the Assyrian invaders, who threatened the northern extremity of Israel's land in the 8th century BC. Now, the phrase "Galilee of the Gentiles" carried an even richer meaning, since the Galilee of Jesus' day was a mixture of Jewish settlements and Greco-Roman installations, not the least of which was the Greco-Roman city of Sepphoris only four miles from Nazareth. Along with the Gentile women in Jesus' pedigree and the visit of magi, this text points toward a divine purpose much wider than the traditional Jewish perimeter.

The change was not merely geographical. The return to Galilee signaled the beginning of Jesus' public proclamation using the same language as John, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17; cf. 3:2)! The phrase "from that time" is Matthew's structural marker, denoting a new beginning (cf. 16:21). This is the start of a long, public ministry in Galilee, the length of which is not addressed by Matthew (though John's Gospel mentions three Passovers from which is derived the conclusion that Jesus' ministry was about three years long).

Early on, Jesus called several disciples to travel with him, Simon (whom he nicknamed *Petros*, cf. Jn. 1:42), his brother Andrew, James bar Zebedee and his brother John (4:18-22). It is probable that Jesus already knew some of these men from his earlier ministry in Judea (cf. Jn. 1:35-42), since they had been disciples of John the Baptist before his imprisonment. All four belonged to the fishing trade, which was a constituent part of the lake culture. The call "come behind me" immediately suggests a rabbinical/student relationship. Their task was to learn from Jesus. He did not begin by saying, "I will give you power," but rather, "Follow me, and I

[39] Standard harmonies usually place the narratives of John 1:29—4:3 prior to Jesus' return to Galilee, cf. K. Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: English Edition* (USA: United Bible Societies, 1982), pp. 16-28.

will teach you to fish for men!" For Peter, this first summons of Jesus would be identical to the final summons—"Follow me" (Jn. 21:22)!

Matthew intersperses several short summaries of Jesus' ministry throughout the gospel, and the first one is here (4:23-25; cf. 8:16; 9:35; 12:15; 14:35-36; 15:30-31; 19:1-2). Though earlier Jesus seems to have participated in a baptizing ministry, similar to John (cf. Jn. 3:22; 4:1), now his ministry was focused upon preaching and teaching, along with healings and exorcisms. The fact that he visited the synagogues of the various villages suggests that his attention was especially directed toward his own people, the Jews (and later, this focus will be explicitly stated, cf. 15:24). Nonetheless, his fame spread throughout the mixed population as far north as Syria, as far east as the Decapolis, and as far south as Judea. His message was the good news of God's rule—the "gospel of the kingdom". In his healings and exorcisms, the reign of God was being demonstrated, for Jesus healed them "all"—every disease and sickness and "all" who were sick, suffering and demonized. Small wonder that great crowds began to follow him from place to place!

The Great Sermon (5-7)

In the first of Matthew's five great discourses, Jesus' teaching on life in the kingdom of God has remained as his the most well-known. The sermons of Jesus, especially in Matthew, may be composites of sayings that he gave at various times or in longer forms.[40] Strengthening the composite view is the fact that much of the material in the various single Matthean discourses is broken up into different settings in both Mark and Luke. Of course, it is not at all unlikely that Jesus taught the same themes on several occasions.

If the first gospel is so Jewish in character, how does this factor impact our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount? One of the most extreme views was developed by dispensational theologians who proposed that in Matthew Jesus offered the millennial kingdom to the Jews on the condition that they would accept his messiahship (e.g., Mt. 10:5-7; 15:24). When as a whole they did not, the offer of the kingdom was withdrawn and postponed until after the church age. Classical liberal scholars, at the opposite extreme, have read the sermon as an interim ethic for an extreme circumstance. They suggest that Jesus was a visionary who anticipated the cataclysmic, imminent end of history. Against both these extremes, the more common

[40] This approach is at least as old as John Calvin, cf. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), pp. 142-146.

approach of Christians through the centuries has been that this sermon is directly relevant to contemporary Christian discipleship.

The Beatitudes and Inward Character (5:1-16)

The Great Sermon begins with the famous eight blessings for spiritual qualities, and a ninth pronounced over those destined for suffering. Here, Jesus reflected upon the message of the ancient prophets and their description of the people of God in the messianic age. The Jews of Jesus' day longed for consolation, justice and mercy, but they longed for these things at the expense of their enemies. If Israel was to experience the kingdom of God, her citizens must embrace the ideals of the kingdom that called for a renewed heart, humility, gentleness and the willingness to accept persecution without recrimination.

The more common use of the word "poor" concerned one's economic condition. At the same time there were the "powerless poor," that is, those who had no effective status in society. Jesus, however, commended those who were spiritually poor, those who recognized their spiritual emptiness and lack of spiritual resource. Such persons were fully aware that their only hope was to cast themselves completely on God for their salvation. The mourners were those to whom the evil of the times is always a continual grief. The way of meekness contrasts the way of power. In the saying on the hungry, the principle question is the meaning of the term "righteousness." Two possibilities exist: personal righteousness and social righteousness. It may well be that the two should not be divided, for surely the messianic hope was both personal and corporate. Mercy, another emphasis, was not a significant part of the Jewish attitude toward Roman occupation. If the Jewish people were to receive the mercy of God, they must be willing to show mercy to others (cf. 6:14-15; 18:21-35). Israel longed for a vision of God, but Jesus asserted that purity of heart, not external purity, was what was needed. Armed resistance was not the way to demonstrate that one was a child of God. Finally, the "kingdom" was for those persecuted for righteousness, not those persecuted for Jewishness. Here, "righteousness" is inextricably connected with following Jesus. This kind of suffering puts one in the company of the prophets, who were ostracized, ridiculed and murdered. Yet it also puts one in the company of the joyous, who have been promised great return in heaven.

In the metaphor on salt, the emphasis is on quality, and this quality moves from the inside out. The metaphor of light points to the same mission. In Galilee, some of the villages lay upon the mountain slopes to the east of the lake. Such cities, plainly visible to all, are what Jesus' followers should

be like.

Jesus and the Torah (5:17-48)

When Jesus began talking about the Torah, he was addressing the central structure of Jewish religious life. The very first point Jesus made was that he was in continuity with the Torah. He declared unequivocally that he was not abrogating the Torah nor the oracles of the prophets.[41] Rather, his mission was to see them filled out to their full meaning.

If Jesus stood in continuity with the Torah, it must still be said that he "deepens, completes and exposes the profoundest implications of the ancient directives."[42] Six times he recalls the ancient commandments and the rabbinical repetitions, and six times he asserts the majestic contrast, "But I tell you..." This antithesis assumes an authority much higher than that of the rabbis.

In the sixth commandment, Jesus extends the prohibition against murder to include the hatred and anger that motivate murder. What God wants is reconciliation, not hatred. It does no good to participate in temple worship by offering gifts to God if one refuses to set things right with one's brother. Don't wait for litigation; settle out of court! The two illustrations of the temple and the lawsuit cover both a "brother" and an "enemy." Both cases call for immediate reconciliation.

Just as there is more than one way to commit murder, so there is more than one way to commit adultery. Again, Jesus emphasizes that God is concerned with motives and thoughts, not just overt actions. Jesus followed his Torah explanation with the hyperbole that it would be better to put out an eye or amputate a limb than allow one's bodily desires to lead him to hell.[43]

The commandment about adultery naturally leads to the issue of divorce, and Moses' ruling was a case law concerning remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4).[44] From this case law, the Jewish rabbis argued over the justifiable conditions for divorce. It was this assumption that divorce was an inherent

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[41] Some interpreters, by emphasizing the antitheses beginning in 5:21, have taken the position that Jesus was indeed canceling the ancient Torah and offering a new Torah in its place. This conclusion seems to be precisely what Jesus says he was *not* doing, cf. J. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978), p. 76.

[42] A. Hunter, *A Pattern for* Life, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 48.

[43] Most interpreters, though not all, recognize Jesus' words as an intentional overstatement to make a point. The 3rd century church father, Origen, castrated himself in order to be able to instruct female students without fear of scandal, cf. *EDT* (1984) 803. The Council of Nicea later forbade this practice, cf. Stott, p. 89. The reference to "hell" is *gehenna*, as in 5:22.

[44] Many scholars recognize two kinds of laws in the Covenant Code, apodictic (absolute commands) and casuistic (situational law). Apodictic laws are direct commands or prohibitions, such as one finds in the ten commandments. Casuistic laws, typical of the ancient Near East, are conditional, based on specific situations and usually framed with some sort of "if" clause, cf. Fensham, *ISBE* (1979) I.793.

right with which Jesus disagreed. Divorce could only be considered as breaking the divine ideal. One does not "tolerate" what is inherently right. Jesus' instruction, then, assumes that divorce is not good or desirable, even though it might be tolerated under Mosaic legislation. His exception is παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας (= apart from a matter of unchastity), an expression that includes such things as incest, fornication, homosexual behavior, prostitution and adultery (see also Mt. 19:9).[45] Such behavior violates the marriage ideal so severely that divorce, while always an evil, may be justifiable. Still, his instruction is not aimed at delineating the reasons that might justify divorce, but rather, to emphasize that among his disciples there should be a basic disposition not to divorce.

Oaths invoke God as witness as to the truthfulness of one's verbal statements. By the time of Jesus, oath-taking in contemporary Judaism had developed into a fine art of subtlety. One of these subtleties was the circumlocution of the divine name. In order to avoid profaning God's name and so breaking the commandment, some Jews employed substitutes for Yahweh's name, such as, "by heaven" or "by earth" or "by Jerusalem" or "by my head". Such oaths were considered to be less binding than actually using Yahweh's name. Jesus points out that these circumlocutions, in fact, do not avoid transgressing the commandment, since God is implied as a witness in them all. It is not the precision of the formula but the intent of the heart that matters most.

The ancient rule about retaliation is the *lex talionis* (Ex. 21:23-25, 27; Lv. 24:19-20; Dt. 19:21). Retaliation against the foreign occupation of the Romans was clearly advocated by Jewish freedom fighters. Jesus urged non-retaliation and offered four examples. First is non-retaliation in the face of contempt and the accusation of blasphemy. A blow to the right cheek assumes a blow with the back of the hand (for right-handed persons), a deep insult and often the accusation of heresy (cf. Acts 23:2; Mt. 27:67-68).[46] Second is the lawsuit in which the plaintiff threatens to confiscate one's *chiton*, the long, close-fitting undergarment in ancient Near Eastern dress. Instead of defending one's right, the disciple should simply offer to his accuser his *himation*, the more valuable outer garment. Third, if a Roman soldier commandeers one's services to carry his military pack for a mile, the disciple of Jesus should carry it yet another mile.[47] Finally, when someone

[45] G. Bromiley, *ISBE* (1979) I.977.

[46] J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), p. 28. This gesture was punishable under Jewish law by a heavy fine, Mishnah *BK* 8.6.

[47] The Romans allowed their soldiers to commandeer civilian labor in an occupied country, cf. R. France, *Matthew [TNTC]* (Lecester, England: InterVarsity, 1985), p. 127.

asks for help, Jesus' disciples should not refuse to aid them. The Torah commandment referred to is Leviticus 19:18. Since the Torah said "love your neighbor," this usually was taken to mean fellow Jews. The silence of the command about one's enemies was taken to mean that enemies deserved to be hated. Still, even the Torah urged generosity and kindness to aliens and sojourners (Ex. 23:4-5; cf. 12:49; Pro. 25:21). One's "neighbor" includes even one's "enemy," since all fellow human beings were "sons of God" in the sense that God created them all. If Jesus' followers wanted to be the true Israel, the true sons of the Father, then they must behave much differently than most people who only offered conventional niceties. Such love must express itself in deeds, words and prayers. The model for such love is not the conventional love of those who only reciprocate in kind, but the radical, undiscriminating and perfect love of God, who sends good to all, both the righteous and unrighteous.

The final summary—that the disciples must be perfect as the Father is perfect—aims at more than simply moral perfection. The word *teleios* means wholeness or completeness.[48] The disciples are to be complete as God is complete, their lives totally integrated into his will. The command to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect echoes the Levitical command, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

The Practice of Religion (6:1-34)

It follows that if conventional Judaism was the manner of religious life accepted by most Jews, Jesus, with his more demanding interpretation of the Torah, should offer his own vision of the religious life he expected. The remainder of the Great Sermon follows this aim.

Among the Jews, the three acts of personal piety Jesus mentions were probably the most prominent in mainstream Judaism.[49] However, such acts could become hypocritical, especially when they were performed publicly in order to impress others. For Jesus' disciples, acts of generosity should be performed privately, for only then could they be done in a way that truly honors God as the divine Father.

The pious Jew had set times for daily prayer, morning, midday and afternoon. The daily *tefillah* (= prayer) consisted of a series of eighteen benedictions along with the *Shema* (recitation of Deut. 6:4-9; 11:3-21; Num. 15:36-41). Wherever he happened to be at the time of prayer, the pious Jew would automatically begin his devotional procedure. Prayers were offered

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[48] *BAG* (1979) pp. 809.

[49] W. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University, 1963), pp. 307-315.

while standing; hence, they were called the *Amidah* (= standing).[50] Of course, for the one who wanted to impress others with his piety, it was all too easy to be "caught" in a public place at the time of prayer or to make the most of synagogue opportunities in order to be highly visible. By contrast, Jesus taught that his disciples should pray privately. The "secret of religion is religion in secret."

If the prayers of Jesus' followers should not be like the Pharisees, they should not be like the pagans, either. The Gentiles, who were polytheistic, attempted to bombard the gods and goddesses with a multitude of titles and words, so much so that they ended up "babbling." The kind of prayer Jesus advocated for his followers was sincere and intelligible, not long and groveling. Prayer is neither a way of informing God of something he missed, nor a leverage against him through a marathon of words.

Commonly called "the Lord's prayer," the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is deceptively simple. The address is to God as Father. After this intimate address comes two "thou" clauses, a statement of reverence and a petition for God's rule to be established on earth to the same degree as in heaven. The third section of the prayer consists of two "we" petitions, the first for sustenance and the second for forgiveness. Finally, the prayer concludes with a plea for protection from temptation and the evil one. The careful observer will note that the prayer is composed in the plural, which suggests that it was intended for the community. Furthermore, as a communal prayer it suggests that it is to be prayed verbatim, that is, Jesus was not offering merely a structural model for prayer to be loosely followed (though he may have been doing that, too); rather, he was offering the very words that he intended his disciples to repeat.

In the teaching that follows, one's forgiveness by the heavenly Father is connected to one's forgiveness toward others (6:14-15). The legalist who only wants "just desserts" cancels for himself God's continued grace and mercy by his unforgiving attitude toward others. The point is not that forgiving others is the way to be saved. Rather, it is that forgiving others is necessary for believers if they wish to avoid the Father's discipline. The phrase, "lead us not," should be read in a permissive sense, that is, "do not let me fall victim..."[51]

The third act of personal piety, in addition to almsgiving and prayer, was fasting. Strict Pharisees fasted twice a week (Lk. 18:12), and as Jesus indicated, they made sure by their pained expressions that it did not go unnoticed. As with almsgiving and prayer, Jesus taught that fasting for any

[50] E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 445-446, 457-461.
[51] Jeremias *New Testament Theology*, pp. 201-202; C. Smith, *IDB* (1962) III.157.

audience other than God was hypocritical.

With regard to material things, Jesus sharply contrasted two kinds of treasure. Earthly treasure deteriorates and is always liable to theft. Heavenly treasure is permanent and secure. So, what is treasure in heaven? Jesus did not specify, but surely he had in mind the very kinds of things he had been emphasizing all along: mercy, peace-making, purity, persecution for righteousness, truthfulness, love, charity, prayer and the like. Jesus' famous saying, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," draws a sharp line. If one's treasure is in God's kingdom, then the very center of one's life will be there, too. If one's treasure is earthly, then one will be preoccupied with material things.

The saying about the eye points toward two conditions. The metaphor suggests a higher, spiritual meaning. In spiritual terms, the person with a "single eye" is one who shows undivided loyalty toward God and the things of God. If what should be spiritual illumination becomes spiritual darkness, what a deep darkness it is! To live for material things is to live a life of darkness, since such a life is not lived for God's eternal kingdom. Jesus concluded this section with the famous saying that one cannot be slave to two masters. Lordship cannot be divided!

Related to his teachings about material security are Jesus' follow-up remarks about anxiety. Anxiety is the antithesis of faith, and a preoccupation with securing earthly things dulls the spiritual senses toward heavenly ones! Instead, the disciples must remember that none of their needs are hidden from the eye of their caring heavenly Father. Jesus rounded off his teaching on materialism with the quip, "Do not be overly concerned about tomorrow, for tomorrow will do its own worrying. Today's misfortune is enough for today."[52]

Attitudes (7:1-12)

Judgmentalism was a way of life for many Jews during the time of Jesus. Racial and social judgmentalism was the outgrowth of the rigorous maintenance of racial purity. Grammatically, it is unclear whether Jesus, when he says "you too will be judged", has in mind the judgment of God or the judgment of others. Both are possible interpretations of the passive voice, though the judgment of God is usually assumed. As in the saying on forgiveness, Jesus is not addressing the subject of how to be saved, as though one could be exempt himself from God's judgment by simply refusing to condemn anyone else. Rather, Jesus is speaking to committed

[52] Albright's and Mann's translation, *Matthew [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 80.

disciples about their attitudes toward others. Harshness toward others invites harshness from God.

To reinforce his point, Jesus once more resorted to humor with the splinter and plank analogy.[53] That Jesus forbids his disciples to engage in judgmentalism does not mean that he intends them to suspend their powers of discretion. Dogs are still dogs, and pigs are still pigs. Both animals were proverbial as undiscriminating beasts (cf. 2 Pet. 2:22). In the present context, holy things and pearls represent the good things of the kingdom.[54] It is no use to give them to those who will not appreciate their value.

Jesus' comments on his disciples' attitude toward others naturally leads back to their attitude toward God. As always, the horizontal relationship is inextricably bound up with the vertical one. The verbs "seek", "knock" and "ask" are metaphors for prayer.[55] The good gifts God gives are those things necessary for natural and spiritual life. The heavenly Father knows what his children need. Constant prayer reinforces one's need to completely rely upon God! Not to ask for such gifts betrays a presumptuous arrogance toward God, as though one could very do without him.

Jesus summarized his teaching on attitudes, and indeed the entire sermon,[56] with what since the 18th century has been called "the golden rule" (7:12). Treating others in the same way you want to be treated by them is the essence of the Law and the Prophets.

The Conclusion (7:13-29)

The conclusion to the Great Sermon comes in the form of three parables—the two roads, the two trees and the two builders. Each marks out the two choices before Jesus' listeners. In the context of extreme Jewish nationalism that was part of the fabric of Galilean culture, especially with its tendency toward armed resistance to Rome, Jesus' Great Sermon offers another alternative.

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[53] The Greek words κάρφος (= speck, chip, small piece of straw, chaff, etc.) and δοκός (= beam of wood) have been variously translated.

[54] Attempts to define "holy things" and "pearls" more tightly are doubtful. An early Christian interpretation of this passage was that it referred to giving eucharist to the unbaptized (*Didache* 9), but the biblical context makes this interpretation questionable.

[55] "Knocking," for instance, is also a metaphor for prayer in rabbinic sayings, France, *Matthew [TNTC]*, p. 144.

[56] The expression "Law and Prophets" at the beginning of the sermon (5:17) and here at the end of the sermon (7:12) seem intended to embrace the whole.

The Early Ministry in Galilee (8-10)

If the Great Sermon collected a broad sampling of the teachings of Jesus, the next section of Matthew's Gospel collects a broad sampling of his healing ministry. Matthew already summarized Jesus' public ministry as "teaching…preaching…and healing" (4:23), and he repeats this summary after enumerating some of Jesus' healings (9:35). This collection contains ten miracles, and all but one of them are either healings or exorcisms (all are also found in Luke's Gospel, and all but one in Mark's Gospel, though not in the same chronology). Interspersed among the miracles are short examples of Jesus' continued teaching.

Ten Miracles (8:1—9:38)

Among the large crowds following Jesus, a man with a severe skin disease[57] knelt before him, asking for help (8:1-2). In Jesus' time, lepers (or persons declared "unclean") were shut off not only from society but also from God, since they could not participate in either synagogue or temple. The fact that this man "knelt" before Jesus (a verb that usually is translated "worship") suggests more than just politeness! That Jesus touched the man is equally remarkable, since any such contact normally would transfer the condition of ritual uncleanness from the leper to Jesus (cf. Lv. 5:3). By contrast, the touch of Jesus transferred the sanctity of the Lord to the sufferer, for when Jesus touched him, he was immediately cured (8:3)! Three other points are important in Jesus' final words. His instruction not to tell anyone probably reflects on the danger of his messiahship being misunderstood (cf. 9:30; 12:16; 16:20; 17:9). His instruction for priestly examination shows his willingness to conform to the requirements of the Torah (cf. Lv. 14). His explanation that this priestly examination was necessary "as a testimony" suggests that his power to heal was a witness to his messianic mission (cf. 11:2-5).

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[57] References to leprosy are found only in the four gospels in the New Testament, usually in the context of Jesus' healing miracles. This condition, which is treated under the priestly legislation in the Torah (Lv. 13-14; cf. Dt. 24:8), concerns inflammations, fabrics and houses. The latter two concern fungal growth, but the former, which addresses lesions and infections, is not easily identified. The symptoms do not seem to be precisely aligned with Hansen's Disease (modern leprosy), though Hansen's Disease might be included (hence, the relevant footnotes in the NIV wherever leprosy is mentioned in the NT). Beyond the issue of diagnosis, however, is the fact that such skin diseases were considered to be one of the more severe impurities restricting the sufferer from the sacred sphere altogether (Lv., 13:45-46; 22:4). The declaration of persons as "unclean" meant that they must be isolated, since they would profane anything or anyone with whom they had contact, cf. D. Wright and R. Jones, *ABD* (1992) 4.277-282.

The second miracle concerned the paralyzed servant of a Roman junior military officer (probably a member of the auxiliary forces under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas). He asked for Jesus' help (8:5-7). Such an exchange between a Roman officer and a Jew would have been quite unusual, but Jesus not only was not put off by this approach, he seemed ready to go to the man's home and heal his attendant. Once again, in addition to the malady of the sick person, the issue of ritual impurity surfaces, since it was considered contaminating for a Jew to enter a Gentile residence. Apparently, the officer understood this well, for he immediately excused Jesus from going to the house, hoping only that Jesus would "say the word" (8:8-9). Jesus' astonished response was that this demonstration of faith was more than he had seen among his own people! In fact, this Gentile's faith had profound implications, for it pointed toward a future horizon in which many non-Jews would be included in God's rule alongside the patriarchs, while many Jews would be rejected (8:10-12). Jesus' remarkable saying is the focus of the entire incident, for it stresses that faith in Jesus, not pedigree, is the decisive factor for membership in God's kingdom. The imagery of reclining at table suggests the messianic banquet (cf. Is. 25:6), which in Jewish apocalyptic had been restricted to Jews only.[58] Jesus abruptly reversed this category!

Next comes a summary of many healings, beginning with Peter's wife's mother, who had a fever, and climaxing with exorcisms and healings for many others in Capernaum (8:14-17). Peter was a native of Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44), about two miles northward on the coast, but during Jesus' ministry, Capernaum became his home base (cf. 17:24-25; Mk. 1:29). Typically, Jesus healed demonized people by his word (without their conscious participation) and sick people by his touch (in response to their faith in him). These healings recalled the Isaianic prediction of Yahweh's suffering servant (Is. 53:4). Incidentally, the common English translation "demon-possession" bears a brief comment. Whether the term "possessed" is the best rendering is debated; the actual Greek construction is a verbal participle meaning "to be demonized", or perhaps more loosely, "to be tormented by a demon". Mark and Luke, in addition to using this verb, also couple the term "demon" with the verb "to have", and the two expressions—to be demonized or to have a demon—seem to be used more or less

[58] The eschatological hopes expressed in apocalyptic literature were predominantly nationalistic, so much so that in many cases the distinction between "the righteous" and "the wicked" was made on purely ethnic grounds, cf. see the insightful discussion on the salvation of Israel and the judgment of the Gentiles in D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 297-303.

interchangeably. Matthew prefers the verb **δαιμονίζομαι** (= to be demonized, cf. 4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:33; 15:22).

Now Matthew offers a short block of Jesus' teaching (8:18-22). In order to escape the gathering crowd, Jesus intended to cross the lake from Capernaum to the Decapolis. As they were making ready, a dialogue ensued between Jesus and two unnamed individuals who contemplated coming with him, one a scribe and the other a disciple. To both, Jesus indicated that following him was no light matter. One must be willing to accept a life of insecurity, even homelessness, and a life of discipleship must become the absolute priority, rising above even the task of caring for an aged parent until he died. The final saying about "the dead" is probably a veiled reference to those who were not followers of Jesus. The cost of discipleship was high!

During the boat trip across the lake, a sudden squall swept in, which is not unusual on the Sea of Galilee with its low elevation and high mountains surrounding the northern tip. Jesus, presumably exhausted, was already asleep.[59] Waking him, the disciples exclaimed their alarm, since the boat was on the verge of being swamped. Jesus chastised them for their lack of faith and, as the master of the created world (cf. Ps. 65:5-8; 89:8-9), rebuked the storm so that it was completely calm (8:23-26). The amazement of the disciples sharpens the basic question about Jesus to which all the gospels give their witness: "Who is this" (8:27)?

Arriving in the Decapolis, the province east of Galilee most easily identified by its ten Greco-Roman cities,[60] Jesus encountered two demonized men who protested his presence (8:28-34).[61] Apparently, demons do not like to be homeless (cf. 12:43-45), and they requested that if they were expelled they should be allowed to enter some nearby swine. This request was granted, and the whole herd stampeded over a precipice into the lake and drowned, thus demonstrating not only Jesus' power over sickness and nature, but his power over the supernatural as well. The local residents then asked Jesus to leave their area!

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[59] The so-called "Jesus boat", a 1st century Galilean fishing craft discovered in 1986 during a low water level season, would have been typical of the class of boat used by Jesus and the disciples, cf. S. Wachsmann, "The Galilee Boat," *BAR* (Sept/Oct 1988) pp. 18-33.

[60] Variant readings exist in all three Synoptics between Gadara, Gerasa and Gergesa, all of which are locations in the Decapolis. The best external attestation is Gadara, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp. 23-24.

[61] On more than one occasion, Matthew's accounts that parallel Mark show a "doubling" of principle characters (i.e., two demoniacs instead of one, cf. Mk. 5:1ff.; two blind men instead of one, cf. 20:30; Mk. 10:46ff.; two animals instead of one, 21:2; Mk. 11:2). On the whole, while these features may be surprising, it does not seem warranted to suggest that Matthew created fictitious numbers for some obscure theological reason, cf. C. Blomberg, pp. 146-148.

Crossing the lake once again, Jesus now returned to Capernaum (cf. 4:13). When confronted with a paralyzed man, Jesus gave the surprising response, "Your sins are forgiven!", which in turn led to charges of blasphemy (9:1-3). In response, Jesus pointed out that it is always easier to say something that cannot be proved or disproved—forgiving sins being the case in point—than it is to give a command for someone to be healed, which can be immediately verified. He said this precisely to show that he had the authority to forgive sins, and in the same breath, he commanded the paralyzed man to get up (9:4-6). The man's immediate cure in turn suggested that his words of forgiveness were not empty, either (9:7-8)!

Next, Matthew describes his own calling from his role as a customs official in the service of Herod Antipas to his inclusion as a disciple of Jesus (9:9).[62] In response to Jesus' call, he hosted a dinner for many of his friends, presumably so they could meet and spend time with Jesus (9:10-11). This led to another criticism—that Jesus "ate with sinners". Table-fellowship was a sign of acceptance, and to accept tax-collectors, who generally were perceived to be non-patriotic betrayers in collaboration with Rome, not to mention "sinners", a term possibly referring to the common people who were less fastidious about the finer points of purity,[63] was unacceptable! Jesus responded to this reproof by quoting Yahweh's words through Hosea (Ho. 6:6) as well as adding two short sayings of his own which clarified his mission to these very sorts of people (9:12-13)!

Controversy would continue to mount as Matthew described Jesus' ongoing ministry. Next, it came from the Baptist's followers who wanted to know why Jesus' disciples were not observing the regimen of weekly fasts (9:14; cf. Lk. 18:12). Jesus' answered with three analogies, all intended to show that his ministry as the messiah was incompatible with any preparatory or traditional system (9:15-17).[64] Wedding guests do not fast after the bridegroom arrives (though Jesus adds that in this case the bridegroom would later be taken away)! It would be folly to attempt to sew a new patch on an old piece of clothing, since when the new piece shrank, it would pull

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[62] In Mark and Luke, Matthew is called Levi (Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27). Levi may have been his given name, while Matthew may have been a nickname given him by Jesus, just as he nicknamed Peter and the Zebedee brothers (cf. Jn. 1:42; Mk. 3:17). Alternatively, it was not unusual for a person to have two names even from birth (cf. Ac. 4:36).

[63] This is the widely accepted view, and some are willing to translate the term ἁμαρτωλῶν as "non-observant (Jews)", cf. W. Albright and C. Mann, *Matthew [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 105. More recently, this view has been challenged by E. P. Sanders, who argues that "sinners" were the wicked who were allowed inclusion within Jesus' company without repentance, cf. E. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 206-211, though such a construction seems to fly in the face of the gospel itself.

[64] C. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom,* 3rd ed. (London: Nisbett & Co., 1936), p. 117.

the old piece apart. The same was true in wine-preservation. To put new wine in a dried, brittle skin would be a disaster, for the fermentation of the new wine would put too much stress on the old skin.

The next narrative is a double healing in which Matthew used a sandwiching technique (a story within a story) to underscore Jesus' power over sickness, ritual impurity and death (9:18-26). Initially, Jesus was confronted by a synagogue ruler (cf. Mk. 5:22) whose daughter was either dying or already dead. As Jesus was on his way to the house, a woman with a chronic hemorrhage slipped up behind him and touched the tassel (κρασπεδον = edge, fringe, tassel) of his robe (cf. Dt. 22:12). Her condition, much like that of leprosy, rendered her perpetually unclean and made unclean anything or anyone she touched (Lv. 15:25-27, 31). As with the case of lepers, direct contact between this woman and Jesus worked in reverse order. Instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the woman was healed of her discharge! Then, the same thing happened when Jesus reached the house. To touch a corpse would have been a defilement (Nu. 19). Even to be within an enclosed room with a corpse was defilement for seven days (Lv. 19:14). Yet, Jesus reversed this defilement by taking the girl's hand and raising her from the dead!

The final miracle stories in this series begin with two blind men who followed Jesus into a house pleading for his help. As with others, Jesus touched their eyes and healed them in response to their faith in him (9:27-31). Just as this healing was completed, a demoniac who also was a deaf mute was brought in, and Jesus healed him as well (9:32-33).[65] As might be expected, Jesus' popularity with the crowds was not shared by the Pharisees, who retorted that Jesus' power derived from Satan himself (9:34).

The series draws to a close with one more summary statement about Jesus' Galilean ministry (9:35-38; cf. 4:23-25). This time the focus is upon Jesus' compassion, since he saw the people as harassed and helpless sheep who were lacking in spiritual, caring leaders. To his followers, Jesus urged prayer that the Chief Harvester—God himself—would send more harvesters into the ripened fields. Jesus' mission was God's mission, and it must become the disciples' mission as well!

The Commission of the Twelve (10:1—11:1)

This, the second great discourse in Matthew's Gospel, begins with Jesus singling out twelve of his followers as special representatives called

[65] The word κωφός means both deaf and mute, cf. *BDAG* (2000) p. 580.

apostles (10:1-4).[66] Jesus' authority over sickness and demonization, which he demonstrated so powerfully throughout the villages of Galilee, he now conferred upon the Twelve. Presumably, the number twelve was a deliberate play upon the original twelve clans of Israel (cf. 19:28). Their role in representing Jesus was to be the nucleus of a new and greater Israel with wider dimensions than the two and a half tribes (Judah, Benjamin and half of Levi) that survived the exile. These included two sets of brothers (Simon Peter and Andrew; James and John), not to mention a revolutionary (Simon the Zealot), and Peter was designated as "first", a clear indication of his prominence.[67]

These twelve Jesus commissioned to a ministry of preaching and healing, the very things Jesus himself had been doing. Like Jesus, they were restricted from preaching to Samaritans or Gentiles (10:5-6; cf. 15:24). Their message was the message of Jesus: God's rule was near (10:7; cf. 4:17, 23; 9:35). Their authority, derived from Jesus himself, was over sickness, death, impurity and demonization (10:8). They could expect Spartan conditions, and they must rely upon the generosity of those to whom they ministered (10:9-10).

They could expect their reception to be varied, as was true for Jesus also. In return for the common courtesies of eastern hospitality, they should pronounce "peace" upon that household (10:11-13). If they were rejected, they should exercise the well-known gesture of repudiation as a symbol of judgment (10:14-15; cf. Ac. 13:51; 18:6; Ne. 5:13). They could expect harshness from the authorities, both Jewish and otherwise, even to the point of arrest and flogging, but they were not to worry themselves over how to respond, because the Holy Spirit would fill their mouths with the appropriate words (10:16-20).

This description, which appears to stretch well beyond anything that happened in Galilee, seems to be even more appropriate for what is recorded in the Books of Acts during the period of the early church. Clearly, this commission of the Twelve already hints at the apostles' wider ministry after the passion and resurrection of Jesus. Hence, there remains some tension between the restrictions not to preach to Samaritans and Gentiles, on the one hand, and the possibility of being arraigned before governors, kings and Gentiles, on the other. (Indeed, in the earliest period of the Jerusalem

[66] The word "apostle" occurs only here in Matthew. Elsewhere, he regularly speaks of the twelve disciples or simply "the Twelve" (11:1; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47).

[67] It is beyond the scope of this study to address the differences between this list and the lists in Mark and Luke. For more discussion, see M. Wilkins, "Disciples," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), pp. 178-181.

church, it may have been this very restriction that prevented the church from preaching the story of Jesus from anyone other than Jews, cf. Ac. 11:19). The tension is due to the fact that the discourse, which begins with the mission of the Twelve in Galilee, is extended to encompass the mission of the church that would come about in due time. That both missions may be in view seems all the more likely in light of the predictions of family betrayal, persecution, flight and the urgent advice to remain firm "to the end" (10:21-23). Jesus' words about not going through the villages of Israel before the Son of Man "comes" may well be a double entendre: in the near future, it may refer to his follow-up of the Twelve in the mission in Galilee, but since it echoes the words of Daniel 7:13, many interpreters accept that it also envisions the second coming at the end of the age (cf. 16:28; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64). If so, then the mission of the Twelve (and consequently, of the church) would not be completed before the return of the Lord.

Such opposition should not deter Jesus' representatives! If they were Jesus' disciples, they should expect no less than the opposition that was leveled at him (10:24-25).[68] In the end, there would be a divine reckoning, so Jesus' disciples should fear only God, not other men (10:26-28)![69] If God kept account of sparrows and the number of hairs on one's head, he surely would care for his faithful disciples—not to mention keep account of instances of their abuse or persecution when the time came for final judgment (10:29-31)! Hence, public loyalty to Christ Jesus was paramount (10:32-33)! They must choose their loyalties carefully, and loyalty to Christ must be higher than loyalty to anyone else, even family members (10:34-37)! In the end, the life of true discipleship was the costly road to death itself—the willingness to forfeit life and the willingness to pick up the patibulum and carry it to the site of execution (10:38-39). Though the disciples would not yet have known how Jesus would die, they certainly knew about Roman crucifixions! Crosses were the well-known instruments of shameful and brutal execution! Only by this surrender of life itself would the disciple find the true life worth living.

Still, the cost of discipleship was not the only factor. There also was the blessing that when someone received a messenger of Christ, he implicitly received Christ himself and would be rewarded accordingly

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[68] Beelzebub (or Beelzeboul) was the name of a Philistine god "Lord of flies" according to Josephus (2 Kg. 1:2, 3, 6, 16; *Antiquities* 9.2.1), though alternative meanings have been suggested based on texts from Ugarit (Exalted Ba'al) and Qumran (Ba'al of heaven, cf. 1QM 12:1-2; 1 QS 10:3 1QpHab3:34).

[69] The Greek word *gehenna* (hell) referred more directly to the Valley of Hinnom, the general garbage dump of Jerusalem, but in Jewish culture it had become a metaphor for the place of final punishment (1 Enoch 54:1-6; 90:26-27; 2 Baruch 85:13; Apocalypse of Abraham14:5; Sibylline Oracles 1:100-103). This metaphorical usage tended to separate Gehenna from its geographical location but retain its fiery character.

(10:40-41). Even something as simple as the gift of cold water to one of Christ's "little ones" (i.e., his despised disciples) would not be forgotten by God.

This second discourse closes with the formal conclusion that appeared at the end of the Great Sermon, i.e., "after Jesus had finished…" (11:1; cf. 7:28). Such a conclusion serves as the transition to the next phase of Jesus' ministry.

Teaching, Controversy and Parables (11-13)

Up to this point, Matthew has offered summaries of Jesus' teachings and miracles, largely presented without lengthy comment on public response. Now, he sets forth just how controversial was the ministry of Jesus by collecting several narratives in which Jesus was misunderstood, criticized, and even rejected. Even before his recounting of Jesus' later question to the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (16:13), he offers vignettes of their varied responses.

Jesus and John the Baptist (11:2-19)

All four gospels recount that the transition between John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus' ministry was not particularly easy for John's loyal disciples.[70] John, for his part, had been apprehended by Herod for his criticism of Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law (cf. 4:12; 14:3-4) and imprisoned at Machaerus, a fortress east of the Dead Sea.[71] Even though incarcerated, the stories about Jesus reached his ears, and he sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if he really was the one who was to come or should someone else be anticipated (11:2-3). Many Christians have been puzzled by this question, since according to the Fourth Gospel John earlier seems to have had such a clear understanding of Jesus' identity (cf. Jn. 1:26-36). Did John have second thoughts? Perhaps John had heard about Jesus' wonderful powers, and perhaps he wondered whether there might not be a miracle for himself, since it seemed everyone else was receiving one! Maybe he expected immediately the fulfillment of a baptism of fiery judgment (cf. 3:11-12) and wondered why it was not forthcoming. In any case, Jesus did not seem put off by the question, but he advised John's disciples to carry to

[70] Later traces of this tension can be found both inside the New Testament (Ac. 18:24-25; 19:1-4) and outside, cf. *Recognitions of Clement.* I.54 and I.60.
[71] *Antiquities* 18.5.2.

their leader a description of Jesus' ministry of healing and preaching (11:4-5). The language Jesus used is clearly drawn from Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1-2, and he obviously intended that John should link these messianic promises with Jesus' own ministry. One more thing: John's disciples were to carry to him an admonition that the one who was not offended by Jesus would be blessed (11:6). Whatever John wanted of Jesus, he must not be disappointed if Jesus' ministry took a shape other than what he expected. John would be one for whom there was no miracle of deliverance, and he must not take offense at Jesus for this foreboding future (cf. 14:6-12).

The incident with John's disciples becomes a foil for all the other varied responses to Jesus' ministry. Just as many rejected John, they also rejected Jesus. John was no weak prophet who catered to the whims of style (11:7-9). He was the direct fulfillment of Malachi's promise of a coming messenger (11:10; cf. Mal. 3:1), and none were greater than John (11:11a)! Still, John belonged to the order of those anticipating the coming of God's rule, and even the very least of those who now received Jesus were blessed beyond John (11:11b). Even from the beginning of John's ministry, the hopes of establishing God's rule had been accompanied by violence, and advocates of violence sought to establish it through armed resistance (11:12). This reference has puzzled many, but in the context of the growing nationalistic patriotism, it is not hard to understand. Extremist Pharisees, not to mention the zealots of whatever party, are probably in the background of this saying of Jesus.[72] Anyone announcing God's rule was implicitly engaging in a serious and relevant comment on the current Roman occupation. At the same time, if Jesus was explicitly opposing armed resistance, as is clear from the Sermon on the Mount, he at the same time frankly acknowledged that advocates of violent resistance were widely popular.[73] But John had not been one of those. While he urged soldiers toward honesty (cf. Lk. 3:14), he never joined the zealot faction. Rather, his role was that of a prophet, indeed, the role of the prophet Elijah predicted by Malachi (11:13-15; cf. Mal. 4:5).[74] Ironically, John himself disclaimed any direct identity with Elijah (Jn. 1:21), but Jesus said he fulfilled the prediction nonetheless, while in John's birth announcement the angel made the same

[72] Wright, pp. 189-197.

[73] Not a few interpreters (and translators) have taken this saying of Jesus to refer to something other than a comment on the political violence that was so prevalent. The NIV's rendering, "the kingdom…has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it," seems to neutralize the more negative sense of the Greek phrase, but most other English versions retain this negative nuance, e.g., "the kingdom…has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force", RSV, so also, KJV, NKJV, NASB, NEB, ESV, NAB.

[74] That Elijah would come as the forerunner of the Messiah was a widely-held opinion (2 Esdras 6:26), cf. *TDNT* (1964) 2.931ff. and J. Walsh, *ABD* (1992) 2.465.

claim (cf. Lk. 1:16-17).

John's preaching, though popular, did not gain wide acceptance, and in fact, some dismissed him as a demoniac because of his asceticism (11:16-18). The same rejection, albeit for different reasons, was leveled against Jesus, whom they dismissed as a friend of sinners (11:19).

Woe on the Unrepentant and Rest for the Weary (11:20-24)

Jesus' miracles were signs of his authenticity. Many people followed Jesus for the sensational aspect of his miracles, but unless they responded with a true change of heart, they still remained under God's judgment. Judgment would be meted out in proportion to opportunity, and the villages of Galilee had the greatest opportunity of all, since they were face to face with God's Messiah. Though not as thoroughly developed as in the Fourth Gospel, Matthew also points out that faith which rests on miracles alone is insufficient. Even paganism and immorality will be judged less severely than an outright rejection of God's message!

In the midst of his announcement of woe, Jesus suddenly broke into a prayer of thanksgiving for those who had responded to his call (11:25-26). Their spiritual perception was a divine gift—something revealed by the good pleasure of the Father's gracious purpose. Jesus' mission was nothing less than the Father's mission, and only between the Father and the Son was there a totality of comprehension and intimate knowledge. Hence, only the Son was able fully to reveal the Father and his divine purpose (11:27). No one could approach God merely by self-initiative.

Then, apparently to the crowds attending him, Jesus issued a call: "Come, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you relief!" This gracious call to be yoked together with the gentle and humble Christ would result in true rest (11:28-30). The rabbis spoke of the "yoke of the Torah" and a disciple as one who put his neck under this yoke. By contrast, Jesus urged that there was an alternative to the feverish intensity of zealotry and the heavy yoke of Torah intensification, and that alternative was in himself! While Sabbath rest was understood to be a symbol of the final rest of the messianic age,[75] Jesus urged that such rest was to be found in himself.

Jesus and the Sabbath (12:1-14)

Quite possibly linked to the immediately preceding reference to

[75] J. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 187.

"rest", Matthew narrates a Sabbath controversy, one of several described in the gospels where Jesus rejected the rabbinic *halakah* as non-binding human tradition.[76] Jesus' disciples had been seen eating from the standing grain in a field (12:1-2), and their action was interpreted as "reaping" by the Pharisees, a violation of one of the 39 types of work strictly forbidden by legal experts (*Shabbath* 7.2). In response to this criticism, Jesus offered several arguments in defense of his disciples. First, David, when fleeing from Saul, ate consecrated bread which was reserved for priests (12:3-4; cf. 1 Sa. 21:3-6). Second, the priests themselves are compelled to "work" on the Sabbath in order to carry out their required priestly duties (12:5-6a; e.g., Nu. 28:9-10). In any case, one "greater" than the temple—Jesus himself—warranted something other than a legalistic viewpoint. Third, if Jesus' critics had taken seriously Hosea's reprimand to Israel that mercy was preferable over even sacrifice, they would have realized how trivial were their criticisms (12:7; cf. Ho. 6:6). Finally, Jesus was himself Master of the Sabbath (12:8)! In this response, Jesus did not abrogate the Sabbath, but he certainly claimed for himself the authority to interpret its framework while rejecting the notion that their man-made Sabbath regulations were binding.

To further underscore the basic truth that the Sabbath was ordained by God as a benefit, not an encumbrance, Matthew recounts a Sabbath miracle in which Jesus healed a man with an unusable limb. Here, Jesus took the initiative, because he knew his detractors were seeking an opportunity to condemn him. Bluntly, he asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath" (12:9-10)? He knew their answer would be "no", since the tradition was that only someone whose life was endangered could be helped on the Sabbath (*Yoma* 8:6). However, Jesus also knew that his critics would act to their own benefit on the Sabbath when necessary, so why should they object to him helping a fellow human? "Therefore," Jesus concluded, "it *is* lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (12:11-12). To the man with the unusable hand, Jesus then simply said, "Reach out your hand." He did not touch the man or take any other physical action that could be construed as work. The simple command, "Reach out your hand," could easily have been made in any number of contexts without risking a Sabbath violation—except in this case, where the man's hand was unusable. At Jesus' word, the man reached out his hand, and it was completely restored (12:13)! So completely foiled and angry were his enemies at this incident that they began to talk among themselves how they might kill Jesus (12:14).

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[76] Jeremias, *NT Theology*, pp. 208-211.

Jesus, the Ebed-Yahweh (12:15-21)

The contrast between the legalistic disclaimers of the Pharisees and Jesus' own character and ministry of gentle healing could hardly have been greater! In spite of the outside criticisms, many sick people followed him, and he healed them all. As before (cf. 8:4), Jesus ordered those he healed that they should not talk about his messiahship (12:15-16). Messiahship was too easily misunderstood in the context of growing nationalism. Better that they should see him as the gentle Servant of Yahweh, the striking figure from the Scroll of Isaiah who bears the Spirit and brings justice to the nations (12:17-21; cf. Is. 42:1-4).[77] Matthew's citation is not a strict quotation—more of a paraphrase, actually—but it captures the essence of Jesus' ministry to the weak and vulnerable. Any harshness or bitter quarreling in Jesus' responses to his interrogators were conspicuous by their absence. The promise to "the nations" would not have been lost on Matthew's readers, since this is ultimately where his gospel will conclude.

Jesus and Beelzebub (12:22-37)

As an outcome of one of Jesus' healings and the amazed question of the crowd whether or not Jesus might be the "Son of David",[78] the Pharisees retorted that he exorcised demons by Beelzebub, an alternative name for Satan (12:22-24).[79] This accusation, which Jesus commented on earlier (cf. 10:24-25), was intended as the harshest of put-downs, for it was tantamount to sorcery, which was a capital crime.[80] Such an accusation could hardly be ignored but required some response, which Jesus gave in a series of short rebuttals.

In the first place, the notion that he was in league with the devil in order to perform exorcisms was ludicrous. It would amount to Satan attempting to defeat his own purposes, which was silly (12:25-26). Besides,

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[77] The enigmatic figure of the Ebed Yahweh (= Servant of the Lord) in Isaiah functions as both a collective figure and an individual figure who is at the same time the whole and the one (i.e., both Israel and the one who saves Israel). In Judaism, the main problem was the relationship of the Ebed Yahweh to the Messiah, since both had the task of restoring the broken relationship between Israel and God. In apocalyptic literature, the Ebed Yahweh and the Messiah are indirectly linked, but at least in official Judaism this link did not include any atoning suffering of the Messiah. It remained for Jesus himself and his disciples to make this link explicit, cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), pp. 52-82.

[78] The title "Son of David" was messianic, both from the Old Testament prophets, who predicted a coming one from David's line, as well as from intertestamental literature (Sirach 47:22; Psalms of Solomon 17). The clearest statement is simply: "See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David…their king shall be the Lord Messiah" (Psalms of Solomon 17:21, 32).

[79] For the identity of Beelzebub, see Footnote 68.

[80] *Sanhedrin* 7.5.

it raised the question of whether or not legitimate exorcisms could even be accomplished by magic, which is how others attempted it (12:27; cf. Ac. 19:13).[81] Contemporary sources indicate that precise rituals and substances were required for exorcisms, giving them a magical character.[82] Jesus, by contrast, used no rituals, no substances, and invoked no names. He simply expelled demons by his own authority, suggesting that his power over Satan was directly from the Holy Spirit. If so, then it was a sign that God's rule had come (12:28)![83] More to the point, if Jesus had authority over the power of evil, it suggested that he was more powerful than Satan, a power that could only belong to God (12:29)!

In this context, Jesus gave a severe warning. All sins were forgivable except one—the sin against the Holy Spirit (12:30-32). While much discussion has aimed at defining precisely what this sin is, the best solution is that it is closing one's heart and mind to the work of God. To do so rejects the very source of forgiveness. Such an antagonistic stance seems to be deliberate, not accidental. This sin is not merely doubt or even unbelief, but an active attribution of a wonderful restoration to Satan. It is, in effect, to say that good is evil, a hardening against God that is irreversible.

Finally, in a series of hard-hitting metaphors, Jesus urges them and anyone listening to pay careful attention to what they are saying. What one says and does exposes what is in one's heart (12:33-37). Fruit trees are assessed by the fruit they bear. Poisonous vipers are incapable of producing anything other than poison. Good people produce good things, and evil people produce evil things. Hence, what a person says flows out of his heart and mind, and all these things will be judged on the last day!

The Verdict on a Wicked Generation (12:38-45)

The phrase "wicked generation" or "this generation" (12:39, 41, 42, 45) ties together the next several sayings. By "generation" Jesus refers to those who oppose him, and by their questions and opposition, they betray their antagonism toward God's mission. Sign-seekers—those who demand a miracle before they will acknowledge God—belong to such an evil pedigree (12:38-39). The only sign to be given was a future one that would only make

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[81] Josephus, for instance, describes the exorcism technique of a certain Eleazar, who put a ring with a special root on it (the Baaras root that grew in the area of Machaerus) to the nose of a demoniac. By this root, he supposedly drew out the demon through the man's nostrils while invoking the name of Solomon and reciting other incantations, cf. *Antiquities* 8.2.5.

[82] G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), pp. 63-65.

[83] Jewish apocalyptic anticipated that when God ruled the world, Satan and his minions would be bound with chains, cf. 1 Enoch 54:3-5; 69:27-28.

sense after Jesus' death and resurrection (12:40).[84] Further, the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba would testify against Jesus' critics at the final judgment, for they had far less opportunity, but responded to what little they had, while those who opposed Jesus had maximum opportunity but rejected the one who was far greater (12:41-42).

Neither was it safe to simply remain neutral! Even a cured demoniac must replace his former allegiance with a new one, else the old demon would return with reinforcements and take over again (12:43-45). Those who may have responded with a level of repentance at the preaching of John must follow through with a firm commitment to the one of whom John preached. Not to make this commitment was to risk being worse off then they were before!

Jesus' Family (12:46-50)

Matthew's final example of opposition came from Jesus' own family. Mark's Gospel is more specific in that it says they thought Jesus was deranged (Mk. 3:21), though here Matthew only remarks that they wanted to speak to him (12:46-47). This became an occasion for Jesus to remark upon the difference between natural ties and spiritual ones. The real family of the Messiah were the ones who responded to God's will (12:48-50). Later, of course, Jesus' mother and brothers would be reconciled to his mission, but at this early point, they appear to be less than supportive.

The Third Great Discourse: The Parables of the Kingdom (13)

One of Jesus' most distinctive methods of teaching was through parables, that is, pithy stories that drew comparisons between daily life or nature and some spiritual truth. This method of teaching was derived from the ancient prophets and consisted of comparing the known with the unknown. A parable is a figurative saying, often using either metaphor or simile, that is expanded into a verbal picture or story. The parables are fictional, of course, but their lessons offer pointed truths about discipleship, God's kingdom and the meaning of Jesus' ministry. Implicitly, parables call for a verdict: "What do you think?" Often, parables have a single main point, and hence, they are

[84] The attempt by some to press the language of "three days and three nights" into an overly literal formula for the amount of time Jesus spent in the tomb (thereby requiring the crucifixion to be on Wednesday), cannot be reconciled with the unanimous testimony that the resurrection was "on the third day". The expression "three days and three nights" may well be a colloquialism, but "on the third day" can never mean "on the fourth day", cf. H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 65-67.

not strictly allegories.[85] However, the parables also were subversive, that is, they were carefully constructed both to reveal truth to those who were open to it but to hide truth from those who were cynical (Mt. 13:10-17). They sought to break through the prevailing Jewish world view and replace it with one that was different.[86] The parables of Jesus comprise more than a third of his recorded teachings in the gospels, though primarily, they are found only in the Synoptics.[87]

Matthew offers several of Jesus' parables in a single collection, all of which describe the nature of the kingdom of God (Mt. 13). They are:

The Sower (13:3-9, 18-23)
The Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43)
The Mustard Seed (13:31-32)
The Yeast (13:33)
The Treasure (13:44)
The Pearl (13:45-46)
The Dragnet (13:47-50)

In these parables, Jesus taught that the coming of God's rule would look very different than what was popularly supposed. Rather than a burst of a fiery national revolution, the coming of God's kingdom would come gradually (*The Mustard Seed* and *The Yeast*). It would involve personal choice (*The Sower*) and deep commitment (*The Treasure* and *The Pearl*). In the end, God would intervene in judgment to separate out of his kingdom those who did not belong (*The Weeds* and *The Dragnet*).

In the parable of the sower, it is helpful to be aware that in Palestine sowing precedes plowing. It might appear that the sower wastes a good deal of seed, but in fact, he walks over the unplowed stubble, which is why some seed feel along the path or among thorns or on limestone covered with a thin veneer of soil (13:3-7).[88] The parable speaks of the difficulties in preaching about God's rule. Not everyone will respond in the same way, and some "seed" seemingly will be wasted. Still, the sower is confident that in the end there will

[85] To be sure, some parables, such as the Sower and the Dragnet, are extended metaphors in which several elements in the story have meaning.
[86] N. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 131, 229-230.
[87] There is some debate about whether John's Gospel contains even a single parable. John 12:35 and 16:21 might count as parables, but on the whole, it is safe to say that parables are primarily a feature of the Synoptics, cf. A. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp. 10-11.
[88] J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 9-10.

be a harvest, in fact, a bumper crop.[89] Hence, each one who listens should "have ears to hear" (13:9).

The parables of the weeds and the dragnet emphasize that no one can properly know in advance the outcome of the eschaton. What is grain to be stored or weeds to be destroyed will not be apparent until the harvest. The weeds are not merely incidental grasses, but darnel (the Greek ζιζάνιον, or *lolium temulentum*), which is very similar to wheat and can only be identified when it is ripe. If it is harvested with the wheat and milled, the flour will be spoiled, since the weed is host to a poisonous fungus (13:37-43).[90] The dragnet or seine, which was the oldest and most important type of fishing on the Sea of Galilee, featured a net shaped like a long wall, 750 to 1000 feet long, about five feet high at the "wings" and 25 feet high at the center. The footrope was weighted with sinkers, while the head-rope had cork floats. After being spread out over 100 yards or more parallel to the shore, it was then hauled in with towing lines on each end by teams of fishermen, bringing in all sorts of fish. The fish were then sorted.[91] Hence, only in the final judgment will it become clear which are "good" and which "bad" (13:47-50).

Some have attempted to relegate the parable of the mustard seed (13:31-32) to some sort of abnormality, that is, a symbol for the later corruption of Christianity that gives shelter to the devil.[92] However, such a construction is altogether unnecessary, and it owes more to the framework of dispensational theology than to any immediate exegesis. Rather, the mustard seed parable, like the parable of the sower, shows that what may seem to be a small beginning will in the end have an incredible climax. The same is true for the parable of the yeast (13:33), where a scrap of leaven produces a thorough leavening of the whole mass of dough. In popular thought, the rule of God would come in a sensational blast of divine intervention. Could this rag-tag bunch of fishermen and workers making their way through Galilee be the beginning of God's rule? Jesus said it was! The two parables contrast the meager beginning and the glorious end.

The two short parables of the pearl and the treasure (13:44-46) underscore the wonder and magnificence of discovering God's kingdom.

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[89] Normally, 10% was considered a good harvest, but 30%, 60% and 100% would have been nearly incredible, cf. A. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 47.
[90] I. and W. Jacob, *ABD* (1992) 2.816.
[91] M. Nun, "Cast Your Net Upon the Waters: Fish and Fishermen in the Time of Jesus," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1993), p. 51.
[92] A. Pink, *The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13* (Covington, KY: Calvary Book Room, n.d.), pp. 36-43.

God's rule is worth more than all—it is like finding the greatest pearl or a huge fortune.[93]

Matthew's collection of parables ends with his observation about Jesus' rejection at Nazareth, his home town (13:53-58). Of most of Jesus' family little is known other than that James later became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Ga. 1:19) and Judas may have written the small epistle bearing his name Jude (Jude 1:1).

The Crisis Approaches (14-16)

John's Execution (14:1-12)

The continuing controversy aroused by Jesus' teaching could hardly lead toward anything but a crisis. The mission of the twelve in Galilee produced mixed responses (10:16-25). The Pharisees had begun to entertain ideas about killing Jesus (12:14). Accusations were flying about that Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker (12:1-2) and/or a demoniac (12:24). The members of his own family were uncertain about his future (12:46-47), and citizens of his home town were offended at him (13:54-57). Now, a new threat appeared in Herod Antipas, who had executed John the Baptist at the instigation of his wife, Herodias, whom he wooed away from his brother Philip. This direct violation of the Torah John had condemned (14:3-5; Lv. 18:16). Herod had consented to John's execution, though he was none too happy about the way he was tricked into it (14:6-11). That Herod's initial reluctance was due to his fear of the people (14:5) aligns very well with the report of Flavius Josephus that John's execution was highly unpopular.[94] When Herod heard reports about Jesus' miracles, he was afraid Jesus might be John resurrected (14:1-2).

After John's death, his disciples buried his corpse and communicated the horrific story to Jesus (14:12). The result was that Jesus now began a series of intermittent withdrawals from Galilee, the area under the jurisdiction of Antipas (14:13, 22; 15:21, 29, 39; 16:4b-5, 13).

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[93] Expensive pearls were certainly known in antiquity. Cleopatra, for instance, was said to have owned a pearl worth six million sesterces (the equivalent of more than three million dollars), cf. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 157.

[94] *Antiquities*, 18.5.116-119.

Feeding the 5000 (14:13-21)

All four gospels narrate the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. If, as suggested earlier (see the comments on 2:13-18), Matthew intended to present Jesus as the personification of the true Israel, then the miracle of feeding the 5000 in ἔρημον τόπον (= a desert place) corresponds with the manna from heaven during the exodus sojourn.[95] Because of his compassion, Jesus again healed the sick and determined to feed the crowds that had followed around the lake when he and the disciples had crossed in a boat (14:13-16). Though the only food available was five loaves and two fish (14:17),[96] Jesus instructed that all should be seated. He then took the loaves, gave thanks, and broke them—until everyone had sufficient (14:18-21). The repeating parallelism of Jesus' action of "taking" the bread, "giving thanks" and "breaking" the bread and "giving" the bread would only become more pronounced later on, after the last supper (cf. 26:26), but it is hard to escape the conclusion that the disciples would see Eucharistic significance in this action here.[97] The fragments left over were far more than the size of the original lunch!

Walking on the Water (14:22-36)

If the miracle of feeding and the earlier miracle of the calming of the storm (cf. 8:23ff.) showed Jesus' power over nature, closely linked to both was the next miracle. Sending his disciples on ahead in a boat, Jesus spent time alone praying in the hills above the north end of the lake (14:22-23). Struggling against a stiff head-wind, they made little progress throughout the night (14:24). In the early hours of morning,[98] they saw Jesus walking out to them on the lake (14:25). At first, they thought he must be an apparition, but the voice was clearly Jesus' voice (14:26-27), and Peter was convinced to the point that he was ready to join Jesus in this display of supernatural majesty. Clearly, the big fisherman was making significant progress in his faith and confidence in Jesus! Initially, he, too, walked on the water, though in the end, he faltered when he began to focus on the wind and the sheer

[95] In the Fourth Gospel, this parallel is specific (Jn. 6:30ff.)
[96] John tells us it was only a small boy's lunch (cf. Jn. 6:9).
[97] Once again, in the Fourth Gospel the Eucharistic significance is more pointedly emphasized in the dialogue that follows the feeding miracle (cf. Jn. 6:53-58). The verbal language of "take", "give thanks", "break" and "give" is typical of the other four gospel accounts of the feeding of the 5000 as well as in Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the feeding of the 4000. The same four verbs appear in the narrative about the two on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:30), and three of the four verbs appear in Paul's account of the Last Supper (1 Co. 11:23-24).
[98] The "fourth watch" is between 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM.

impossibility of what was happening (14:28-30). Jesus' gentle chiding[99] followed by yet another calming of the wind was overwhelming: the disciples fell before Jesus and worshipped him, acclaiming him as God's Son (14:31-33).

When they reached land at Gennersaret, once more briefly in the territory of Antipas, people came from the surrounding villages with their sick folk (14:34-35). Many wanted only to touch Jesus' robe, as had the woman with the hemorrhage (cf. 9:20-22), and indeed, this woman's story may have been spread around. All who did so were healed (14:36)!

Purity and Purity Laws (15:1-20)

Purity and purity laws were huge issues within the Jewish community. Substantial parts of the ancient text of Leviticus as well as other parts of the Torah required a strict distinction between purity and impurity. Already in some of his healings, Jesus had reversed the expected contagion by contact with lepers, blood and death. Purity is clearly the issue here in the accusation that Jesus' disciples did not practice the ceremonial washing of hands (15:1-2). Though not specified in the law of Moses, the ceremonial washing of hands was part of the tradition of the Jewish elders—the oral law of *halakic* tradition later codified in the Mishnah (*Teharot*) that consisted of extended rules beyond the Torah.

In defending his disciples, Jesus pointed out the hypocritical inconsistencies of their legalism, by which they were willing to pass condemnation for any violation of man-made rules, such as the hand-washing ritual, but were content to gloss over violations of God-ordained commandments, such as, honoring one's father or mother (15:3-6). Responsibility for aged parents was conveniently evaded by the *corban* formula in which a person dedicated to God what should have been available to his mother and father for their sustenance. In this way, the donor could satisfy his obligation to God and exempt himself of his parental obligation.[100] This behavior was nothing more than a pious fraud, and Jesus

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[99] The expression "little faith" has led some to define faith as quantitative—as though faith were a substance, and if only one could get enough of the precious stuff, almost anything could be accomplished on demand. This application probably misses the intent. "Great faith" or "little faith" is first of all directed toward a person—Jesus Christ—not a felt need, however desperate. It is probable that the expression "great faith" and "little faith" are meant as metaphors for the presence or absence of faith altogether rather than quantitative amounts of faith. Mark's account, for instance, does not speak of "little faith" (as in Matthew), but says, "Why is it that you do not have faith?" (Mk. 4:40), while the Lukan parallel reads, "Where is your faith?" (Lk. 8:25).

[100] The Mishnah would later stipulate that whatever was declared *corban*, even rashly, could not be used for any other purpose, cf. *Nedarim* III.6; IX.

condemned it as hypocrisy—a veritable nullification of God's own Word! It was no more than what Isaiah had predicted (15:7-9; cf. Is. 29:13).

To reinforce his point, Jesus asserted that defilement was not a matter of what a person takes into his mouth, but rather, what a person allows to be uttered from his mouth (15:10-11)! Critical to this pronouncement is the phrase "from the heart", which in Jesus' explanation indicates that sinful external behaviors are driven by internal human fallenness (15:15-20). The scribes and Pharisees, through their pedantic legalism, were nothing more than blind guides misdirecting others (15:14). Though they took umbrage at Jesus, they were among the plants that ultimately would be uprooted by the Father in the last judgment (15:12-13), a pronouncement that may intentionally have recalled for the disciples the parable of the weeds (cf. 13:30).

Healing for a Desperate Gentile (15:21-28)

Once more, as in the narrative of the centurion's servant (cf. 8:5ff.), Jesus was approached by a non-Jew when he traveled northward into Phoenicia where Tyre and Sidon were the principle cities (15:21). A woman of Canaanite extraction with a demonized daughter appealed for his help repeatedly, so much so that the disciples were for sending her away (15:22-23). Already, Jesus had underscored to his disciples that the mission in Galilee was to Israel only (cf. 10:5-6), so their reluctance is understandable. Jesus now reemphasized that same basic orientation: his public ministry was only for Israel (15:24). Nevertheless, the woman pressed on, kneeling before Jesus and pleading for help (15:25). Jesus' response was seemingly a derogatory slur (15:26), not untypical of the general Jewish attitudes but very uncharacteristic of Jesus himself. Why did he say such a thing? Perhaps, as France has suggested, Jesus may have uttered this with a twinkle in his eye (texts cannot easily convey body language).[101] One suggestion is that this was a maxim about household pets and need not carry the full force of a brutal slur.[102] Critical scholars have even suggested that Jesus may not have said this at all, preferring that the passage is a "retrojection into the life of Jesus of [a] controversy…within the early church".[103] Jeremias points out that at the very least Jesus would not grant this woman's request until she acknowledged the divinely ordained division between God's people and the

[101] France, *Matthew[TNTC]*, p. 247.
[102] Gundry, pp. 314-315. However, the term "dog" in the East, even today, is the supreme insult, so Gundry's attempt to soften Jesus' words may not be valid.
[103] F. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1981), pp. 342-343.

Gentiles.[104] In the end, the woman's desperate persistence won out, for she frankly acknowledged that though she had no right to immediate help, she was prepared to take second place for the sake of her daughter (15:27)!

This scenario that began so harshly is resolved by Jesus' compassion. He granted her request for healing, and as had happened with the centurion (cf. 8:10), he remarked upon her great faith (15:28). Both these incidents prepare the way for Matthew's climax at the end of his gospel, when the message will be proclaimed to the nations!

Feeding the 4000 (15:29-39)

Both Matthew and Mark record a second feeding miracle in addition to the one that appears in all four gospels. Because the basic narratives are so similar, some have sought to collapse the two incidents into one. Matthew, clearly, regards them as separate (cf. 16:9-10). Returning to Galilee, Jesus once more was followed by large crowds who brought their sick for him to heal (15:29-31). Their response to the healings in which "they praised the God of Israel" suggests that this crowd was non-Jewish, and following hard on the incident concerning the Canaanite woman in Phoenicia, Matthew may well be pointing to the broadening of Jesus' ministry beyond the Jewish circle.[105]

As before, Jesus' compassion led him to perform another multiplication of bread and fish, this time feeding the crowd from seven loaves and a few small fish (15:32-38). As before, the verbal sequence is identical to the feeding of the 5000: he "took" the bread, "gave thanks", "broke" it, and "gave" to the disciples, who in turn gave it to the people. Again crossing the lake, Jesus went to Magadan, an unknown location (15:39).[106]

Demand for a Sign by the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1-12)

Though the Pharisees and Sadducees had noteworthy differences, they came together to challenge Jesus to show them a sign from heaven,

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[104] J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, trans. S. Hooke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 30.

[105] Mark's account seems to locate the miracle specifically in a Gentile area, since he prefaces the narrative by saying, "during those days", i.e., the days when Jesus had gone down to the Sea of Galilee on the eastern shore within the Decapolis (cf. Mk. 7:31). Some interpreters have observed possible symbolic value in the number of baskets remaining from the two miracles of feeding, one Jewish (12 baskets signifying the 12 tribes) and one Gentile (7 baskets signifying the 7 Gentile deacons in the early church, cf. Ac. 6:5-6), cf. D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 255-256.

[106] Mark's Gospel has "the districts of Dalmanutha", also unknown (Mk. 8:10). Some early manuscripts of Matthew read Magdala (C N **Δ** Θ, etc.), but the earliest texts read Magadan (**א** B D, etc.).

presumably a sign to demonstrate that he was the messiah. Jesus, of course, had produced any number of miracles already, but the challenge of the Jewish leaders was nothing more than a ploy, and Jesus knew it. He rebuked their insincerity, once more saying that no sign would be given them except the enigmatic sign of Jonah (16:1-4; cf. 12:38-40). Here, Jesus offers no explanation of the sign of Jonah, but the fact that this incident follows the feeding of the 4000 in Gentile territory and the healing of the Canaanite woman's son may suggest that part of the meaning is that Jonah was the one Israelite prophet who preached to non-Jews. The Jewish leaders were unable to discern the "signs of the times", the times when the door of exclusive Jewish opportunity was now being opened to Gentiles.[107]

Crossing the lake once again, Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the "yeast" of the Pharisees and Sadducees, a saying that they at first misunderstood due to their preoccupation with food (16:5-7). In explaining that he was not talking to them about literal yeast or bread, Jesus chided them for their lack of trust in God to supply their material needs (16:8-11). In the end, they realized he was talking about the insidious hypocrisy underlying the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:12; cf. Lk. 12:1).

Peter's Great Confession (16:13-20)

Once more skirting the territory of Antipas, Jesus now traveled with his disciples to the territory ruled by Philip, Antipas' brother (16:13a). This was largely a Gentile area, Caesarea Philippi being a city (formerly called Paneas) near the headwaters of the Jordan and renamed in honor of Tiberius and Philip himself. Here, Jesus began to question his disciples about how the crowds perceived him. The form of the question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Mark and Luke have simply "I"), suggests that Jesus intentionally used the title "Son of Man" because of its ambiguity. It could simply refer to him as a human being (based on the wide use of this title in the Book of Ezekiel), or it could refer to him as the man from heaven who would rule the nations (based on the Book of Daniel 7:13-14). The crowds offered various answers, including the speculation that he was John the Baptist resurrected, Elijah *redivivus*, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. Clearly, the only figures that seemed to match Jesus' supernatural powers or

[107] Verses 2-3 in this text are missing from the earliest Greek manuscripts (א B X, etc.). Though Jerome included the verses in the Vulgate, he acknowledged that most manuscripts known to him did not have them. Most scholars believe the verses are an interpolation assimilated from Luke's account (cf. 12:54-56), cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 41.

his messages of judgment against Israel's leaders were from Israel's ancient past. It now was time for the disciples themselves to come to terms with Jesus' true identity (16:13b-15), for this is the basic question of all the gospels, "Who is Jesus?" Peter, spokesman for the group, confessed openly, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16; cf. 14:33)! His confession was much the same as that of Martha, though hers, presumably, was chronologically later (cf. Jn. 11:27).

Peter's confession led to Jesus' response that such faith was not self-produced, but was given by direct revelation from God (16:17). Then follows a pun on the name of Peter, the rock upon which Christ would build his church (16:18). The Aramaic *Kephas* (*Petros* in Greek), a name meaning "Rock", was the nickname Jesus had given Peter at the beginning (Jn. 1:42). Now, Jesus said he would build his community (ἐκκλησία = assembly, church) upon "this rock" (πέτρᾳ = rock)—a community that would not be overcome by death itself! The expression "gates of Hades" is an idiom for the realm of the dead.[108]

Protestants, in reacting to Roman Catholic claims about the primacy of Peter as the first pope, have sought alternative explanations so that "the rock" was not Peter himself, but rather, his confession. Alternatively, some have supposed that "the rock" is Jesus himself, the latter explanation assuming some accompanying gesture in which Jesus motioned to himself. These interpretations owe more to an objection to the Roman Catholic explanation than any exegetical considerations.[109] More naturally, the rock upon which Jesus declared he would build his church was Peter, the first disciple to come to an understanding of Jesus' true identity. This can be true without any additional assumptions about the role of the Roman pontiff or the Roman Catholic Church as the arbiter for admitting people to heaven or the Roman Catholic priesthood as having the continuing authority to forgive sins, and the like.[110] That Jesus' next statement conferred the "keys" of the kingdom directly to Peter also suggests that he was speaking about Peter in the former statement. The statement about the "keys" likely is a metaphor describing Peter's role in the initiation of the apostolic community. Peter

[108] While preachers have often taken the phrase "gates of Hades" to be a reference to the demonic forces of evil, and that the church will advance forcefully against them in spiritual warfare, this is unnecessarily fanciful and unlikely to be correct. Hades generally referred to the abode of the dead, not necessarily the place of torment or the abode of evil spirits, and it had become a near synonym for death itself (cf. 2 Maccabees 6:23; 1 Enoch 102:5; 103:7; Sibylline Oracles 1:81-84; Testament of Abraham 8:9; 19:7; Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-16; 16:13). The actual phrase "Gates of Hades" appears in Psalms of Solomon 16:2 as a synonym for death.

[109] W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2.139-142.

[110] Hill, p. 261.

preached the first Christian sermon (Ac. 2), he along with John was present to confirm the gospel to the Samaritans (Ac. 8:14-17), he was the first to share the gospel with a Gentile (Ac. 10), and his testimony at the first Jerusalem council about what had happened at the Gentile soldiers' home was decisive for the apostles' confirming the mission to the Gentiles (Ac. 15:7-11).

Jesus' additional statements about "binding" and "loosing" have a later parallel in which this authority is given to all the apostles (18:18), and it has a near parallel in the Fourth Gospel, which also is directed toward the whole group (cf. Jn. 20:23). The language of "binding" and "loosing" should be understood in its 1st century Jewish context, where such phrases were used by the rabbis to mean "allowing" or "forbidding". To bind something was to forbid it; to loose something was to allow it. Both phrases were used in regard to making decisions with regard to the law. Hence, this saying of Jesus concerns the administration of the apostles in church issues (as opposed, for instance, to the admittance or rejection of persons to the church). The fact that the verbs are unusual—future perfect passives (i.e., "will have been bound" and "will have been loosed")—suggests that any decisions reached by the apostles will be those that already had been established by God. The apostles would be acting in accord with heaven, not creating new rulings by which heaven was bound to agree. The apostles would be acting as stewards of what God already had decided.[111]

The concluding warning that the disciples should not at this time tell anyone that Jesus was the Messiah (16:20) is very much in keeping with Jesus' other statements that caution was necessary to avoid misunderstanding (cf. 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; 17:9). Later, Jesus would specify that such an identification could only be fully disclosed after his resurrection (cf. 17:9).

Jesus' Prediction of Death (16:21-28)

Peter's declaration was a watershed. The phrase "from that time" marks a transition, and central to this new phase of ministry would be Jesus' repeated prediction that he would suffer in Jerusalem, be executed, and raised on the third day (16:21). If Peter had now confessed in behalf of them all that Jesus was God's Messiah, it now remained to show how this messiahship would be radically different than anyone was expecting! It was a messiahship ending in suffering and death, not military victory and

[111] R. France, *The Gospel of Matthew [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 626-627.

apocalyptic conflagration!

Indeed, it would be Peter himself who most strenuously objected to this messianic conception. He chastised Jesus for even thinking such a thing (16:22). Nonetheless, Jesus knew that Peter was only a sounding board for the thoughts of others, and in fact, in Peter's objections Jesus could see the tail of the serpent (16:23)! To them all, Jesus urged that if they were to be true disciples, they must embrace the cross (16:24).[112] Only by renouncing their right to life would they find their true selves (16:25-26). The future glory of the Son of Man would not be according to the popular script, which was more a scenario of military victory like that of Judas Maccabeus. Instead, following suffering, death and resurrection, the Son of Man would come in his Father's glory with the angels to judge the world (16:27)! Here, then, is the true meaning of the ambiguous title "son of man" with respect to Jesus. It does not refer merely to Jesus as a human being (along the lines of the Book of Ezekiel), but it refers to him as the Man from heaven (from the Book of Daniel, 7:13-14). This was the messiahship of Jesus, and it must be the messiahship embraced by his disciples.

Jesus' final statement was that some of the disciples would not die before they had witnessed the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom (16:28). At first blush, this saying, similar to the one in 10:23, might seem to place Jesus' coming to judge the world within the lifetimes of his first disciples, and indeed, some early Christians may have thought as much (cf. Jn. 21:23).

How should this prediction be understood? Several primary interpretations have been offered. Easily the most negative with respect to Jesus is that he expected the eschatological climax within his own lifetime but was badly mistaken.[113] One of the more popular views is that Jesus was anticipating his transfiguration, which Matthew will take up in the next pericope. Certainly Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah could qualify as a glimpse of his glory and kingdom, and this interpretation may have been specifically referenced when Peter later would speak of the "power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" in his transfiguration on the holy mountain (2 Pe. 1:16-18).[114] Yet a third view is that Jesus was talking about his

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[112] Both Jesus and the disciples knew well the meaning of the cross. Roman crucifixions were common enough, and after the revolt of Judas ben Hezekiah, who raided a Roman armory in Sepphoris about four miles from Nazareth in 4 BC about the time Jesus was born, the Romans crucified 2000 Jewish rebels on crosses set in lines along the roadside, *Antiquities*, 17.10.9-10. The memory of this display of Roman vengeance must have made a gruesome and indelible impression, and Jesus could hardly have been unaware of it.

[113] A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 330-397.

[114] Albright and Mann, p. 201.

resurrection, and the "coming" was not his second advent, but his appearances to the disciples on and after Easter.[115] A fourth is that he was speaking specifically of the coming judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70. This preterist view tends to take many if not most of the "coming" passages in Matthew to refer to that event.[116] Finally (and this may be the best option), Jesus may have been speaking about the whole complex of events that attended his death, resurrection, the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the power of the risen Christ in the apostolic church.[117]

More Training and the Final Withdrawal from Galilee (17-20)

The Transfiguration (17:1-13)

A few days after Peter's great confession,[118] Jesus singled out the so-called "inner three" of Peter and the Zebedee brothers for a private excursion up one of the mountains in upper Galilee (17:1).[119] Here, a wondrous event occurred in which Jesus was gloriously transfigured as he appeared talking to the great ancient representatives of the Torah and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah (17:2-3). Neither Moses nor Elijah ended their lives in ordinary ways. Moses was "buried" by God on Mt. Nebo/Pisgah (cf. Dt. 34:1, 5-6), but by the time of Jesus, the general view was that this "burial" was no ordinary interment, but rather, an assumption directly into heaven.[120] Elijah was caught up into heaven by whirlwind (2 Kg. 2:11). Further, there was a popular Jewish belief that both these figures would return in the Messianic Age.[121] Matthew does not describe their conversation, though Luke offers the comment that they spoke about Jesus' "departure" (Lk. 9:31).

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[115] R. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 162.
[116] R. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 55-56.
[117] D. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.382.
[118] Both Matthew and Mark say "six days", but Luke says "about eight days" (Lk. 9:28). It is unusual for there to be such precise dating for any events in Jesus' life, and outside the passion narratives these references stand alone, which underscores how significant was Peter's confession and the events that happened shortly afterward. Luke's "about eight" maybe nothing more than a rounded-off way of saying "about a week", cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 797.
[119] Later, in Gethsemane, Jesus will also set apart these same three (26:37).
[120] This view was expressed in an early 1st century text called *The Assumption of Moses*, and though the text is no longer extant, other ancient references to it indicate that it described an account of Moses being taken directly to heaven.
[121] *TDNT* (1964) II.938 and IV.856-857.

Three critical events are probably intended to be linked here: Peter's great confession, Jesus' announcement that he would die and rise, and this visible expression of glory. Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah had been immediately reshaped by Jesus as a messiahship of suffering and death, but lest there be any doubts about the appropriateness of such an event, Jesus appears transfigured in a brief prolepsis of his future glory as he talks with Moses and Elijah. They serve to give validity to Jesus' prediction.

Peter, ever brash though not always perceptive, suggested building three booths, probably the sort of shelters erected during the Feast of Booths to commemorate the desert sojourn (17:4). What he may have intended by this suggestion has never been clear, but his confused speech was interrupted by God's voice speaking out of the cloud, confirming that Jesus was his well-loved Son, and his Son was the one to whom attention should be paid (17:5). That the cloud was "bright" suggests the cloud of God's glory from which he spoke to Israel at Sinai (Ex. 24:16). By this time the three disciples were so overwhelmed by such a supernatural display they fell to the earth, but Jesus reassured them and carefully instructed them not to divulge this incident until after he was raised from the dead (17:6-9). Only then would such an event make sense as seen in light of his resurrection.

Later (Mark's account says they were coming down from the mountain, cf. Mk. 9:9), the disciples asked about the appearance of Elijah (17:10). Certainly Malachi had predicted that Elijah would appear before the "great Day of Yahweh" (Mal. 4:5), but as it was, it seemed to them that he had come late, well after Jesus' ministry had begun. However, Jesus assured them that the prophecy about Elijah had been fulfilled in John the Baptist, though John was not recognized as such (and indeed, John did not even recognize himself as such, cf. Jn. 1:21, though see Lk. 1:16-17). Just as John had been rejected, so also would the Messiah be rejected (17:11-13).

The Healing of an Epileptic Demoniac (17:14-21)

Upon their descent, a father whose son suffered from seizures[122] pled with Jesus to heal his boy, since the other disciples had been unsuccessful (17:14-16). Jesus' severe comments on his disciples' lack of faith underscored the problem with the crowds as a whole, and after he healed the boy, the disciples questioned Jesus why they were unable to expel the demon (17:17-19). Jesus' answer was that they lacked faith. In fact, real faith—if

[122] The unusual verb σεληνιάζομαι (= to be moonstruck) was associated with perceived transcendent powers of the moon. Idiomatically, it came to refer to epileptic seizures, cf. *BDAG* (2000) p. 919. Here, however, it is not merely epilepsy, but demonization that was the true state of the boy.

indeed it is the real thing—was sufficient even if only the size of a mustard seed, which is another way of saying that it is not great quantities of faith that is necessary, but genuine faith (17:20). The reference to "moving a mountain" is a metaphor for overcoming seemingly impossible obstacles (cf. Zec. 4:6-7).[123]

Back in Galilee, Jesus once more restated his prediction that he would be killed and raised to life, this time also including the fact that he would be betrayed (17:22-23). As before, his resurrection would be "on the third day".

The Temple Tax (17:24-27)

Because of the ancient commandment about atonement money (Ex. 30:11-16; cf. Ne. 10:32-33), the temple authorities levied a tax for the upkeep of the temple. Tax collectors went from town to town to collect, and among the Diaspora, tax houses were erected to receive the half-shekel payments.[124] When the collectors approached Peter to inquire whether or not Jesus paid this tax, Peter confidently replied, "Yes" (17:24-25a). Later, however, Jesus questioned Peter about the whole concept of taxation. The point of his question is that if rulers do not tax their own sons, why should God's Son be compelled to pay a tax for the temple (17:25b-26). Nonetheless, Jesus instructed Peter to go catch a fish, and he would find a four-drachma coin in the mouth of the first fish he caught![125]

Who is Greatest in God's Kingdom (18:1-14)

The fourth great discourse in Matthew collects teachings related to the larger purpose of Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. They include four sections, the question about who is greatest in the kingdom, the parable of the lost sheep, the teaching on restoring a brother who sins, and the parable of the unmerciful servant. All four aim to show that compassion, restoration and salvation are the central foci of Jesus' ministry.

The question, "Who is greatest in God's kingdom?", possibly sprang from Jesus' comments about earthly kings and taxation. Earthly kings took

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[123] While later manuscripts include the statement that such demons could only be exorcised by prayer and fasting, the earliest manuscripts are lacking in this verse (א B Θ 33 579 892), and it is almost universally recognized that they do not belong to the original text. Mark's Gospel contains the commandment on prayer (Mk. 9:29), but the addition of the words "and fasting" is unlikely to be original, either, cf. Metzger, p. 101. In any case, Mt. 17:21, which appears in the KJV, should not be used to justify a theology that fasting can become leverage by which one gets God to do things.

[124] *Antiquities* 18.9.1; J. Branton, *IDB* (1962) 4.521.

[125] The *tetradrachmon* coin is found only here in the New Testament, though it was a common enough coin. Apparently, the Jews united to pay the temple tax in pairs, cf. D. Wheaton, *NBD*, rev. ed. (1982) 792.

rank quite seriously, and if Jesus was God's Son and the head of heaven's kingdom, how would the subjects of this kingdom be ranked (18:1)? Jesus illustrated his point by using a child as an object lesson, explaining that greatness under God's rule was predicated on one's willingness to change and take on the insignificance and vulnerability of a child (18:2-5). On the other hand, to take advantage of such vulnerability was inexcusable, and here, "one of these little ones" is not merely someone of young age, but someone who is a disciple of Jesus (18:6). The world system is full of offenses, but those who cause such offenses are under a curse (18:7).[126] Better to go through life without a hand or foot or eye than to risk damnation by such offenses (18:8-9)!

The two expressions **πῦρ τὸ αἰώιον** (= fire of the age) and **γέεννα τοῦ πυρός** (= gehenna of fire) stand in sharp contrast to the expression **εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν** (= enter into life). By "life", Jesus means the life beyond the present life, while the language of "fire" refers to the place of final punishment (see footnote #69).[127]

So great is God's pastoral care over such "little ones" that to offend them is to risk reprisals from angels (18:10)! The possessive form "their angels" has been the primary passage for the idea of guardian angels, that is, that in heaven's court every child has an advocate with constant access to God.[128] God's care over his "little ones" is like that of a shepherd who will go out to search for even a single lost sheep though he has many others who have not wandered away (18:12-13)! Jesus' emphasis is on the joy of finding the lost one, because it was the Father's will that none of his "little ones" would perish (18:14). How different was this expression of God's joy than was typical of the religious leaders, whose tendency was to exult over the

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[126] The expression "woe" as used here is probably akin to the expression among the writing prophets, where the exclamation "Woe!" becomes an "intense outburst of invective directed against wrong-doers, conveying a note of threat," and in effect, becomes a curse formula, cf. R. Clements, *ABD* (1992) 6.946.

[127] The Christian discussion about the precise nature of final punishment is long-standing. Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch in the Ante-Nicene Church thought the wicked would become extinct. Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom and Augustine, on the other hand, believed the wicked would exist eternally in torment. More recently, the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain published a comprehensive treatment of the debate from all sides with the aim of uniting against universalism while at the same time allowing tolerance toward the various views about hell., cf. R. Peterson, "Undying Worm Unquenchable Fire," *Christianity Today* (Oct 23, 2000), pp. 30-37. Four general views are discernible: 1) hell is eternally conscious physical and spiritual torment (fire is a literal description of actual conditions), 2) hell is eternally conscious spiritual torment (fire is a metaphor, not a literal description), 3) hell is eternal separation from God (hell is an eternal loss of communion with God, and its nature is essentially relational), and 4) hell is conditional immortality and/or annihilation (i.e., immortality is only granted to the saved).

[128] The community at Qumran held that angels were the protectors of the meek, the needy, the despised and the orphans, cf. 1QH v.20-22. Alternative ideas are that all humans have "spiritual doubles", cf. Tasker, p. 176 or that this passage refers to the spirits of deceased children, cf. Carson, p. 400-401 (cf. Ac. 12:15).

destruction of the unrighteous![129]

Restoring a Brother who Sins (18:15-20)

Jesus' early statement to Peter about the building of the "church" assumes that his disciples will be formed into a community. Within that community, relationships are paramount. While often this passage is taken as an order for church discipline, the emphasis, in fact, is not primarily about excommunication but inclusion. The procedure for restoring one who offends begins in privacy with the aim of bring the offender back into fellowship (18:15). This is not a restoration that glosses over sin, however. At the same time, it seeks to avoid as much damage as possible by urging as much privacy as possible, first by approaching the person one-on-one, then by approaching him with one or two others, and only at last by putting the matter before the whole community (18:15-17). Ostracizing the offender is a last resort when all other expedients have failed. Traditionally, too many harsh church leaders have read this passage in the same way as the Jewish leaders treated offenders—as sinners to be cut off instead of as lost sheep to be found, but the link between this order for restoration and the parable of the lost sheep should not be severed.

It is in the context of restoration that the additional saying about "binding" and "loosing" should be read (18:18; cf. comments on 16:19).[130] The decision of the community will be final with respect to what is considered proscribed behavior versus permissible behavior, and this decision in turn would result in allowing the penitent offender back into full fellowship or restricting the unrepentant from fellowship. Further, there is no indication that such efforts at restoration or discipline are reserved for community leaders alone. Rather, it is the whole community that is in view. Even if the restoration is effected by as small a number as two or three (presumably the two or three mentioned earlier who go to the offender privately)—disciples who act in harmony with the compassion of Jesus (i.e., in Jesus' name)—their decisions will reflect what already has been the decision of heaven,[131] for they are acting in the spirit of Jesus toward

[129] H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922-28) II.209.

[130] It should be observed that there is a shift in the Greek text between the singular "you" (which is used throughout the teaching on restoration) and the plural "you" (which now is directed toward the whole company of disciples).

[131] As in 16:19, the verbs are passive future perfects.

restoration (18:19-20; cf. 28:20b).[132]

Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (18:21-35)

This parable, which follows hard on the parable of the lost sheep and the teaching on restoration, continues the theme of forgiveness. It came as an answer to Peter's question about how often forgiveness should be extended—even up to seven times?—to which Jesus replied "seventy times seven" (18:21-22)![133] To illustrate such unlimited forgiveness, Jesus told the story of a king settling accounts in which one creditor owed his lord an astronomical sum (18:23-27).[134] Though forgiven the immense debt when he pled for mercy, this creditor turned on someone else who owned him a trifling sum and mercilessly threw him into prison (18:28-30). When his fellow officials reported this hard-hearted inconsistency, the king arraigned the original creditor and put him to torture,[135] because of his poverty of compassion (18:31-34). Jesus then gave the clincher: this is the way the heavenly Father will treat those who do not show compassion and forgiveness (18:35; cf. 6:12, 14-15). This, the last of the four pericopes about offense and restoration, underscores the larger purpose of Jesus' mission—to seek the lost and save them if at all possible! Matthew 18 carries the same basic message expressed so succinctly in John 3:17: the Messiah did not come to condemn but to save!

The Question About "Any Cause" Divorce (19:1-12)

The great Galilean ministry had now come to an end. Jesus began the southward movement that ultimately would end in Jerusalem by crossing the Jordan at the fords south of the lake and traveling through the Transjordan area of Perea, still continuing his healing ministry (19:1-2).[136] Somewhere along the way, the Pharisees tested him with a question about divorce, since

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[132] Conventionally, 18:19-20 has been used to refer to any sort of Christian meeting, but while doubtless this may be true by extrapolation, the focus of Jesus' words was concerning the restoration of a sinner, not a formula for church assembly per se.

[133] The rabbis put the limit at four times, Peter was even more generous, but Jesus implied that forgiveness should be unlimited, cf. Hill, p. 277.

[134] According to Josephus, Herod the Great's annual revenue was only about 900 talents, cf. *Antiquities* 17.12.4, so 10,000 talents was an incredible debt. The number 10,000 was often used idiomatically to refer to an infinitely large number, cf. H. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 1154.

[135] The phrase "turned him over to the jailors" probably implies more than just imprisonment, since torture was regularly used in the East against disloyal or tardy subordinates, cf. Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 165-166.

[136] Josephus described Perea as the area east of the Jordan from Pella (in the north) to Machaerus (in the south), *Wars of the Jews*, 3.3.3.

there was a contemporary heated debate between the followers of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai on the issue (19:3). Mosaic legislation allowed divorce under the rubric of עֶרְוַת דָּבָר (lit. "a thing of nakedness" (Dt. 24:1).[137] The followers of Shammai interpreted this expression as a single phrase meaning sexual unfaithfulness (cf. Dt. 22:13-21). The followers of Hillel treated the two words in the expression as two different circumstances, the word "nakedness" as referring to adultery and the word "thing" as referring to some other ground. This very lenient interpretation resulted in divorce for virtually whatever reason—which could be almost anything a husband found offensive, even to badly cooked food.[138] It was this "any cause" divorce that Jesus rejected outright. He referred them back to God's original intent for marriage implicit in the creation account, where God made one man for one woman—for life (19:4-6)! Their rejoinder, as might be expected, was to ask why Moses legislated divorce in the first place (19:7)? Jesus corrected their language that Moses "commanded" a divorce certificate. Moses did not "command" but rather "permitted", and this permission was due entirely to the stubbornness of their hard hearts (19:8a)![139] Divorce was never God's intent (19:8b). Further, Jesus interpreted that the passage in Deuteronomy 24:1 was confined to immorality, and it could not be liberalized to mean "any cause". Those who had divorced their wives and remarried under the leniency of the "any cause" interpretation had themselves committed adultery![140]

It should be understood that Jesus was answering a direct question about a specific passage in the Torah. To extract his answer out of this

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[137] There were additional laws that also affected marriage, divorce and remarriage. For instance, if an Israelite sold his daughter into debt-slavery (presumably to be a concubine or wife), and her husband was not pleased with her, she could be redeemed by a fellow Israelite, and once redeemed, was free, i.e., to marry a husband of her choice (Ex. 21:7-11), cf. R. Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction & Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), pp. 166-167. In fact, the Jewish divorce certificate actually stated "You are free to marry anyone you wish", cf. D. Instone-Brewer, "What God Has Joined," *Christinaity Today* (Oct. 2007), p. 29. Similarly, a divorced woman had the right to make a binding vow, which in turn implied her right to a new marriage (Nu. 30:9). A slave-wife taken in a war action who then was not pleasing to her husband could be divorced (Dt. 21:10-14), but if so, she was free (i.e., to marry again), cf. P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 282.

[138] D. Instone-Brewer, p. 28. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), pp. 57-58. This is the form of divorce described by Josephus, who wrote, "He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever (and many such causes happen among men), let him in writing give assurance that he will never use her as his wife any more; for by this means she may be at liberty to marry another husband, although before this bill of divorce be given, she is not to be permitted so to do", cf. *Antiquities* 4.8.23.

[139] The Pharisees used the verb ἐντέλλω (= to command, to give orders), but Jesus responded with the verb ἐπιτρέπω (= to allow, to permit).

[140] In Matthew's earlier passage on the subject, Jesus said that the man who so divorced his wife had "caused" her to commit adultery (Mt. 5:32), because she would need to seek remarriage in order to survive.

context is inappropriate. Jesus, for instance, did not countermand the Torah passage that specified a legitimate divorce on the grounds of physical or emotional neglect (cf. Ex. 21:10-11). Further, his response that the Deuteronomy passage was talking about marital infidelity does not contradict Paul's later teaching that divorce is permissible for abandonment (cf. 1 Co. 7:12-13, 15). At the same time, Jesus makes quite clear that God's intent from the beginning was that marriage would be for life. Divorce, while it may be permissible under some circumstances, is always a breaking of God's ideal—and it is always due to human callousness!

The disciples' response that perhaps the single life was better (19:10) elicited yet another comment from Jesus. Singleness was not for everyone (19:11, and Paul will later agree by calling singleness a "gift", cf. 1 Co. 7:7). Some, of course, are physically incapable of marriage, and in the ancient world some were intentionally made eunuchs. Still others, presumably those with the gift of singleness, have given up marriage in order to serve God more fully (19:12).

Jesus and the Children (19:13-15)

Whether or not the Jewish custom of bringing children to the elders for a blessing lay behind the mothers who brought their children to Jesus is unknown.[141] Still, the disciples' attempt to protect Jesus' time by rejecting the children was inappropriate, for little children who are innocent and trusting are the very type who belong to God's kingdom (cf. 18:2-3).

The Wealthy Young Man (19:16-30)

A young man from the crowds (Luke specifies that he was a "ruler", cf. Lk. 18:18) asked Jesus how to earn favor with God by doing something sufficiently noteworthy to gain eternal life (19:16). Before answering, Jesus asked a rhetorical but pointed question, "Why do you ask about what is 'good' (as though you, a human, could produce true goodness), since only God is good (and therefore, only his standards of goodness are acceptable)?" Without waiting for an answer, Jesus simply said to obey the commandments (19:17), and in the following dialogue, cited several of the 10 commandments along with the summary command to love one's neighbor as oneself (19:18; cf. Ex. 20:12-16; Lv. 19:18). When the young man confirmed that he already lived by these commands but asked what

[141] *Sopherim* 18.5.

remained, Jesus struck to the very heart of the man's condition: he needed to part with his wealth and follow Jesus (19:20-21). This the young man was unwilling to do, and he turned away (19:22).

The young man's dilemma prompted Jesus to talk to his disciples about wealth. Earlier, Jesus had said that one thing which choked out the message of God's rule was the deceitfulness of wealth (cf. 13:22). Now, he commented on how difficult it was for the wealthy to submit to God's rule (19:23-24).[142] The disciples were astonished (after all, Peter, though almost certainly not wealthy by any contemporary standards, owned a home in Capernaum), but Jesus encouraged them by saying that all things were possible with God (19:25-26)! To the question about rewards, Jesus said that his twelve apostles had a special role in the "rebirth" (i.e., the new age). They would govern (or judge) the twelve tribes—an eschatological Israel—sharing in the authority of the Son of Man (19:27-28; cf. Da. 7:14, 27). Jesus' original choice of twelve apostles signaled that the eschatological Israel was now in the offing (cf. 10:1ff.).[143] Interpreters have sharply disagreed over how this eschatological Israel would be constituted. Those supporting "replacement theology" see it fulfilled in the church, where the church replaces Israel as God's people. Premillennialists usually see it fulfilled in the millennial reign of Christ, and dispensationalists understand it to refer quite literally to ethnic Israel in their ancient land. Still others see the definition of Israel widened beyond the original constituency of the 12 tribes so that through Christ Israel includes all God's people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in the same body (this view should not be confused with the replacement theology mentioned above). The latter view seems to align itself best with the larger picture of New Testament theology, so long as one understands that all Israel (whether Jewish or non-Jewish) must be saved through faith in Christ.

In addition, those who gave up all to follow Jesus would receive compensation both in this life (cf. Mk. 10:30) and eternal life in the age to come (19:29). However, the world's values would be set on their head, for those who usually were considered to be "first" would end up "last" and vice

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[142] The difficulty of this saying is underscored by how Christians have treated it. As early as the 5th century, an expansion of this saying began to appear in some manuscripts of Mark's Gospel, "Children, how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God" (i.e., one might have riches but not trust in them). More recently, it was pointed out that the Greek word for "camel" is similar to the word for "cable", and some editors offered the rendering, "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Others have suggested that the expression "eye of the needle" really refers to a small opening in the larger gate of the city, but this idiom is of relatively late origin and severely anachronistic. In the end, the saying must be left as it stands. No doubt it is a hyperbole, but it is a very potent one!

[143] G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 109.

versa (19:30).

Parable of the Workers (20:1-16)

To illustrate just how different from conventional wisdom would be the rewards when God claimed his rightful kingship, Jesus offered the story of the vineyard farmer. He summoned five groups of laborers to work his vineyard, but each group was hired at a different time of the day. The earliest group was promised a denarius, which was the common wage for a day's work (20:1-2). The groups hired later—some nearly at the end of the day—were simply promised that they would be paid whatever was fair (20:3-7), and by conventional standards, it would have been expected that their remuneration would be prorated on the basis of their work hours, i.e., some fraction of a denarius.

At the end of the day, the farmer instructed his steward to pay the workers, beginning with those hired only an hour earlier. To each worker in all five groups the steward paid a single denarius (20:8-9). When the group who had worked the whole day was finally paid, they complained that the ones who worked much less were paid the same. The farmer simply responded that they had received what he promised them, and why should they complain if he decided to be generous to the others (20:10)?

In this parable, Jesus demonstrated several important points about the kingdom. First, just as he had said to the disciples earlier, every one who leaves what he values most to follow Jesus will inherit eternal life (cf. 19:29). It makes no difference whether a person serves his whole life or only responds in old age—the reward of eternal life will be the same. Second, God's generosity in giving rewards is the behavior of kindness and sympathy, especially against a background of unemployment.[144] God's grace should not be denigrated when he dispenses it to those who have not earned it, for in his kingdom reward is not reckoned on the basis of merit. Third, there may also be a hint of the broadening of Jesus' mission to non-Jews. If the people of Israel, who at least in one sense had been "hired" early on and had "born the burden of the work and heat of the day" in their long history, they should not complain if Gentiles were invited to participate even if "late" in coming. Jesus concluded once more with the equalizing statement, "So the last will be first, and the first last" (20:16; cf. 19:30).

[144] Josephus, for instance, tells of relief works in Jerusalem to give work to 18,000 unemployed after the building of the temple, cf. J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribners, 1966), p. 111.

Another Prediction of Death (20:17-19)

For the third time Jesus reaffirmed to his disciples that he would die in Jerusalem, and he deliberately took them aside from the crowds to instruct them (cf. 16:21; 17:22-23). The details were now becoming more specific. On the first occasion, he said that he would suffer from the Jewish leaders, be killed and on the third day be raised. On the second, he added that he would be delivered up (or betrayed). Now, he adds that he would be turned over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged and crucified. Though earlier Jesus had solemnly said that his followers should "take up the cross" (16:24), his words had been metaphorical. Now, he directly indicated that he was to die by crucifixion. As on the other occasions, his resurrection would be on the third day.

A Request by the Mother of James and John (20:20-28)

Zebedee's wife seems to have been one of the women who accompanied Jesus either on his preaching tours or at least on this last trip to Jerusalem (cf. 27:55-56; Lk. 8:2-3). At first glance, her request seems arrogant and contrived, but in light of Jesus' statement that the twelve would sit on thrones with him and judge the tribes of Israel, she no doubt wanted to make the best case for the future of her sons (20:20-21). What she did not understand very clearly was that glory would be preceded by suffering, which is why Jesus used the metaphor of "the cup", a symbol of his coming suffering (20:22). In fact, both sons indeed would drink from "the cup", James as the first of the apostles to be martyred (cf. Ac. 12:2) and John in his imprisonment on Patmos (Rv. 1:9).[145] Nonetheless, the places of highest honor in the coming kingdom were to be awarded by the heavenly Father, and in fact, they had already been designated, though Jesus does not say to whom (20:23).

The other disciples, who were listening to this exchange, took umbrage at the request (though any of them may well have entertained the same notions of grandeur). Jesus assembled them and explained the nature of leadership in his new community: it was to be based on servanthood, not the desire for control (20:24-27). Pagans (Gentiles) had the mindset of authority and control, but his disciples must follow the example of their master, who came into the world to serve others (20:28). His greatest service was his sacrificial death as a substitutionary payment. If Jesus gives his life

[145] There is, of course, considerable discussion as to whether the "John" in Revelation is the son of Zebedee, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this commentary. For a brief summary, see R. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 802-805.

as a "ransom for many", those who benefit from his death are loosed from the consequences of condemnation. This statement is the first in Matthew's gospel that the death of Jesus would be in the stead of others.[146]

Two Healings Near Jericho (20:29-34)

The typical pilgrim route from Galilee to Jerusalem via Perea crossed the Jordan River at Jericho into Judea. The sharply rising road between Jericho and Jerusalem traversed the Judean wilderness, and after leaving Jericho, Jesus' itinerant ministry comes to a close.

Two blind men (one named Bartimaeus, according to Mk. 10:46) began to cry out when they heard that Jesus was passing, calling on him by the messianic title Son of David (20:29-30). Once again, Jesus' compassion prompted him to respond, and after he had touched their eyes and healed them, the men followed on with Jesus toward Jerusalem (20:31-34). Thus, Jesus' last act of itinerant ministry was an act of healing and service—the very thing about which he had been instructing his disciples![147]

On to Jerusalem (21-23)

Jesus Arrives in Jerusalem (21:1-22)

From the time of Peter's great confession, Jesus made it clear that the climax of his messianic mission would be in Jerusalem (cf. 16:21; 20:18). In Luke's Gospel the last several weeks, perhaps months, of Jesus' public ministry all happened while he was "on his way" (Lk. 9:51-53; 10:38; 13:22; 14:25; 17:11; 18:31; 19:28, 41). In John's Gospel, Jesus' several visits to Jerusalem are recounted (Jn. 2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22-23; 12:12), but Matthew does not include them in his gospel. Still, for Matthew Jerusalem was the ultimate goal.

Traditionally, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is called his "triumphant entry", and clearly Jesus' ride into Jerusalem was deliberate (he had walked from Galilee, so there was no need to ride the last two miles from Bethphage on the Mt. of Olives into the city except by deliberate

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[146] Protestant liberals have bristled at the notion that Jesus' death was substitutionary, but in fact, this element simply cannot be extracted from the meaning of the words used, cf. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 11-64.

[147] As with the other so-called doublets (see discussion in Footnote #61) in which Matthew describes two, whereas the Synoptics describe one (cf. Mk. 10:46; Lk. 18:35), Matthew's fuller account need not imply that he has expanded the number arbitrarily from Mark's narrative.

intention). According to John's Gospel, this event occurred just five days before Passover (Jn. 12:1, 12). The use of the donkey and colt not only recalled the royal entrance of Zion's king predicted by Zechariah (Zec. 9:9; cf. Is. 62:11), it also served as a symbol of peace. Unlike horses, which were used for war, donkeys were creatures of peace (21:1-5). Presumably the gate through which Jesus entered was beneath what is today's walled-in Golden Gate.[148] The crowds celebrated Jesus' entry, strewing the road with their cloaks and cutting fronds while shouting, "Save, now!", the exclamation from the final Psalm in the Egyptian Hallel (21:6-11; cf. Ps. 118:25-26).[149]

When he gained the temple courtyard, Jesus confronted the exchangers and animal vendors, driving them out while quoting from the prophets (21:12-13; cf. Je. 7:11; Is. 56:7). The Court of the Nations, the one place where anyone, even a foreigner, could come to pray, had been taken over by a system that made it virtually impossible to use as a place of worship. Further, Jesus' deliberate action hinted at a demise in the temple system that he would make explicit in his teaching later that week (cf. 24:1ff.). Similar to his healings of those ritually unclean, Jesus now healed the blind and lame in the very temple precincts, the areas from which they had been excluded since ancient times (21:14; cf. Lv. 21:16-23; 2 Sa. 5:8b). Naturally, those who were so healed were exuberant, but their voluble praise and the contagion of their worship that extended even to children, offended the temple authorities (21:15-16; cf. Psa. 8:2). Jesus then withdrew, and he and his disciples, like most pilgrims to the city, spent the nights of the Passover celebration outside the city walls (21:17; cf. Lk. 22:39).[150]

The next day, Jesus cursed a fig tree because it had no fruit (21:18-19). At first glance, this action might seem petty and vindictive, but more likely, it should be viewed as a further symbolic act alongside Jesus' entry into the city on the donkey (a symbol of his kingship) and the cleansing of the temple (a symbol that the temple system was under judgment). The fruitlessness of Jerusalem was a barrenness that also would come under

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[148] In 1969 a young archaeology student stumbled into the discovery of an ancient gate beneath the present Golden Gate on the eastern wall of the old city of Jerusalem, and this was probably the gate through which Jesus entered when coming from the Mount of Olives, cf. J. Fleming, "The Undiscovered Gate Beneath Jerusalem's Golden Gate," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1983), pp. 24-37.

[149] Psalms 113-118, a short run of Psalms used at the annual Passover, was commonly called the Egyptian Hallel to mark the salvation that began with deliverance from Egypt and would spread to all the nations, cf. D. Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), p. 401.

[150] The numbers of pilgrims attending Passover is cited in ancient references as astronomical, i.e., about 3 million, cf. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 6.9.3-4. However, there is reason to take these figures as exaggerations, and a much more feasible figure would be around 125,000 or perhaps less, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 77-84.

divine judgment, just as John the Baptist had predicted (cf. 3:10).[151] The disciples, for their part, were more impressed with the miracle of withering (21:20). Jesus responded to their question by another allusion to the metaphor of the immovable mountain (21:21-22; cf. 17:20; Zec. 4:7). Immovable mountains could be moved by prayer! It should be assumed, of course, that such a miracle should come not so much at the will of or merely for the benefit of the one who prays but at the will of God. To "have faith" while "not doubting" is full confidence that God is able and that God wills to do it. It is not a faith that is merely self-interested (cf. Ja. 4:2-4).

The Controversy Over Authority (21:23-27)

In Jerusalem, the pace of opposition increased sharply. Jesus was questioned and challenged by most Jewish groups, including the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and a legal expert in Torah. Against the power brokers of Jewish religion were the common people, who were entranced by Jesus' ability to navigate such dangerous waters unscathed (cf. 21:26, 46; 22:33). Intermingled with these confrontations, Jesus gave three parables, all of which addressed the Jewish leaders' antagonism in one way or another. All these conflicts aimed at dismissing Jesus as a false prophet, his enemies repeatedly trying to trip him up in order to condemn him, and all were without success!

The first issue concerned Jesus' authority, which naturally followed his clearing out of the temple exchangers and animal venders (21:23). His antagonists were the chief priests and elders, the principle members of the Sanhedrin who were the guardians of temple religion. Using a common technique, Jesus answered their question with a question about John's baptism, since Jesus' authority was closely linked to that of his forerunner, John. The phrase "John's baptism" is a metonymy for John's ministry, and the fact that John baptized Israelites implied that even those who were racially pure needed spiritual renewal, easily the most objectionable feature of John's ministry. Jesus' counter-question was whether or not John's ministry was divinely ordained or humanly contrived (21:24-25a). This left Jesus' opponents on the horns of a dilemma, especially since this exchange was publicly aired in the temple courts. To dismiss John as a fraud would have been highly unpopular, but if they admitted that John's ministry was divinely instituted, they knew Jesus would immediately put to them the fact that they had failed to respond to John's call to repentance. Hence, they took

[151] J. Motyer, "Fruit," *NIDNTT* (1975), pp. 724-725.

the safest route and declined to answer at all (21:25b-27).

Three Parables About Whom God Accepts (21:28—22:14)

Jesus continued his teaching by offering three parables. All three focus on the larger question of who is acceptable to God, a question that was usually answered along the lines of racial purity, Torah intensification, political alignment or support for the temple. In the parable of the two sons (21:28-32), Jesus underscored the validity of John's ministry. It was not those who claimed God's acceptance, but rather, those who actually did God's will who were acceptable. Those despised outcasts who responded to John's ministry by repentance and baptism (and by implication, those who responded to Jesus' ministry as well) were far ahead of the religious leaders who did not repent or believe John!

The second parable about the tenant vineyard farmers addresses the Jewish leaders' rejection of John in the larger context of the whole prophetic tradition (21:33-41), and it is far from accidental that Jesus used the imagery of the vineyard, since it would have been well-known as a powerful symbol of the people of Israel (cf. Is. 5:1-7). The prophets were repeatedly sent to collect fruit from the vineyard, but they were all mistreated or killed. At last, the absentee landowner sent his own son, expecting that the tenants surely would honor him, but they murdered him as well. In light of Jesus' repeated predictions that the Jewish leaders would reject and execute him in Jerusalem, this horrific aspect of the story was even then beginning to take shape. Then comes Jesus' question: what will the vineyard owner do? He would severely punish those wicked tenants and rent his vineyard to others! It should not have been difficult to see that in this conclusion the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus would become the open door of opportunity for others, and in fact, this is precisely how later Christians would understand it (cf. Ro. 11:11, 25). From the story of the rejected son Jesus then moved to the rejected stone (21:42-43). The Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus was exactly what had been predicted in the great Hallel Psalm 118:22-23, where the rejected stone became the most important stone of all.[152] God's kingdom would be removed from the nation of Israel and given to another—and here, Dick France makes the very important observation that the expression **ἔθνει** (= to a nation) is in the singular, not the plural. In other words, those who will receive God's kingdom are not simply "the nations", as though the Gentiles would replace Israel, but rather, a new nation altogether, a nation

[152] The **κεφαλὴν γωνίας** (= head of the corner) could refer either to a keystone or a cornerstone, but in either case, it refers to the one most important for the stability of the structure.

composed of both Jew and Gentile. This shows both continuity and discontinuity with the old covenant, and the nation that will receive God's kingdom is the one that brings forth fruit, not one whose membership is based on ethnic origins, whether Jewish or Gentile.[153] In an addition that probably reflects upon Isaiah 8:14-15 and Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45, Jesus said that anyone who trips on this stone will be shattered in judgment, and those upon whom it falls will be crushed (21:44)![154] It did not take much perspicacity for the Jewish leaders to perceive that this parable was leveled at them, and their antagonism only increased (21:45-46).

The third parable describes invited guests who refused to come to a royal wedding banquet, not only making flimsy excuses to be absent, but mistreating and killing the messengers who went out with the invitations (22:1-7). A royal invitation was nothing less than a royal command, and as in the parable of the wicked tenants, the king executed severe penalties on the "city" of these shirkers who slighted him. Since the invited guests would not come, the king summoned ordinary people from the streets, no matter their condition. One of them, however, came without being appropriately dressed, and he was summarily thrown out (22:8-13).[155] As with the previous parables, those originally invited by God refused his gracious call, so God now called tax-collectors and sinners. Still, even though the invitation now went out to those who were not initially called, it still was incumbent upon them to come dressed appropriately. Anyone can come, but all who do must attend in a way that is appropriate to the occasion. To attempt to gain entrance otherwise results in disaster! The final statement, "Many are called, but few are chosen," means that many are invited to participate in God's rule, but only a few end up belonging to the messianic community of salvation.[156]

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[153] The NIV translation of ἔθνει as "people" is not helpful and, in fact, can be misleading.

[154] This verse, which appears in Luke 20:18, is not in some of the earliest manuscripts of Matthew, which is why it is eliminated in the JB, assigned to the margins of the RSV and NEB, and placed in brackets in the NAB. Other English versions retain it (NIV, NASB, KJV, ESV, NRSV).

[155] It may be that the king actually provided wedding garments for his common guests, and that by refusing to wear the wedding garment provided, the man, like the originally invited guests, snubbed the king, cf. S. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 104.

[156] Initially it should be observed that the term ἐκλεκτοί (= chosen ones) is a nominative plural noun, which in English translation is sometimes confused as verbal. In other words, the emphasis is on the group, not how they were admitted to it. It is not that God calls many but only chooses some, but rather, that God calls many but only some belong to the community, cf. W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990), pp. 67-69.

Paying the Imperial Tax (22:15-22)

No doubt the Pharisees and Herodians were incensed by Jesus' parables, which had been spoken publicly and undisguised with special reference to them! Attempting to trap Jesus, they posed a question about the imperial poll tax, a question prefaced by some well-placed but insincere flattery (22:15-17). Imperial taxes, of course, were highly unpopular, so the question put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he supported taxation, he would lose popular support, but if he objected, he could be reported as a resister.

Jesus was not intimidated. In asking for a denarius, the very fact that his opponents were using Roman coinage meant that they could hardly object to paying taxes! After all, the coin had the facial image of Caesar stamped on it. However, the second part of his reply—"[give] to God what is God's"—suggests something more profound. If the image of Caesar is in the coin, what image is impressed in the individual person himself? Only one—the image of God (cf. Ge. 1:27), and it was much more important to give to God what belonged to him than to give to Caesar the poll tax (22:18-22)! In seeking to trap Jesus, his enemies demonstrated their rank hypocrisy. They were not interested in responding to God, but only in snaring Jesus. So, once again, Jesus foiled his enemies, leaving the crowds in amazement at his wisdom!

Marriage in the Resurrection (22:23-33)

The next group to confront Jesus were the Sadducees, who offered what was probably a stock question intended to reduce to absurdity the whole idea of resurrection.[157] Their question was about levirate marriage in the resurrection (22:23-28; cf. Dt. 25:5-6). Jesus bluntly replied that they did not know the Scriptures or God's power to create new conditions, since in the coming age life will not follow the customs of the present age. The stinger, of course, was his reference "they will be like the angels", since the Sadducees not only rejected the idea of resurrection, they also rejected the idea of angels (22:29-30). Jesus' final parting shot was that God declared, "I am the God of the patriarchs" (cf. Ex. 3:6),[158] and therefore, he could hardly

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[157] Josephus says the Sadducees believed "souls die with the bodies", hence, there is no resurrection, cf. *Antiquities* 18.1.4, and Luke confirms the same, adding that Sadducees also reject the idea of angels and spirits (cf. Ac. 23:8).

[158] Though there is only an assumed verb in the Hebrew text of Ex. 3:6 (אָנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ = I [am] the God of your father), the LXX makes the present tense explicit (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ πατρός σου = I am the God of your father).

be the God of those who ceased to exist! Rather, he is the God of those who are alive—dead, perhaps, with respect to normal human life, but alive to God just the same (22:31-33)! The Sadducees could hardly refute his logic, for he was quoting from the Torah itself, that part of the Hebrew scriptures they considered highest of all!

The Greatest Commandment (22:34-40)

The final confrontation occurred when a Torah expert[159] posed a theoretical question about the greatest commandment. Given that the rabbinical tradition distinguished no less than 613 commandments in the Torah, to single out the "greatest" was no simple task. Jesus' answer was to summarize the whole principle of the Torah in two commandments, the ones from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 (cf. Ro. 13:9). It is in order to point out that to "love one's neighbor as oneself" is not merely an emotional abstraction, but a concrete expression of benefit to one's neighbor.[160]

Who is David's Lord (22:41-45)?

While his opponents still surrounded him, Jesus now took the initiative with a penetrating question of his own about the Messiah's identity. All agreed that the Messiah would be a son of David, for this was a commonplace among the prophetic writings (cf. 2 Sa. 7:11-16; Is. 9:7; Je. 30:9; 33:15; Eze. 34:23; 37:24; Ho. 3:5) and later (Sirach 47:11, 22; 1 Maccabees 2:57; Psalms of Solomon 17; 4 Ezra 12:32-34). Further, Jesus seems to assume his listeners would agree that the figure of Adonai[161] in Psalm 110:1 was the Messiah, though whether or not this was a current, widespread opinion is unclear.[162] Three figures are in view in Psalm 110:1: Yahweh, Adonai and David (assuming David's authorship). If Yahweh spoke to Adonai, and if Adonai is David's "lord" (the possessive "my lord" is clear in both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint), how can Adonai who is David's "lord" also be the Messiah, who is David's son? The implications

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[159] The term "lawyer" appears only here in Matthew, though it is found half a dozen times in Luke. The parallel passage in Mark 12:28 suggests that a "lawyer" was the same as a "scribe".

[160] While the Hebrew verb **אָהַב** (= to love) usually is transitive and takes an object, the command to love one's neighbor is intransitive and is followed by an indirect object introduced by the preposition "to" (i.e., you shall do love to your neighbor), a relatively rare construction. This means that what is intended is not merely emotional concern but beneficial action, assistance or concrete help, cf. A. Malamat, "'Love Your Neighbor as Yourself': What It Really Means," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1990), pp. 50-51.

[161] In the LXX, the Greek word **κύριος** (= Lord) frequently is a rendering for the Hebrew *Adonai.*

[162] See the discussion in J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1311.

were profound! No one could have been greater than great David except a divine figure, for David was at the pinnacle of earthly power! Yet, to admit that David's "lord" was the same as the Messiah, who was David's son, implied that the Messiah must be a divine figure. This interpretive conundrum silenced them all! Their lack of response testified that in such public debate they were no match for the teacher from Galilee!

The Last Great Discourse (23)

Jesus' final discourse, the fifth of Matthew's collections, falls into two parts. The first was given publicly, a follow-up to the sharp confrontations in which Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees (23). The second part was given privately to the disciples on the Mt. of Olives overlooking the temple precincts (24-25).

In the first part, Jesus directly spoke to the crowds, though his subject was the scribes and Pharisees. No less than six times he labels them hypocrites (23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29).[163] The sting of his chastisement has been keenly felt,[164] and Pharisaism has become a synonym for religious legalism and external bigotry, the precise antithesis of grace. It was not, of course, that scribes (or Pharisees) were inevitably to be denounced, for on occasion Jesus also treated them as serious seekers after God (cf. Mk. 12:28-34). Still, their system of practicing religion contained more than its fair share of tendentiousness, and (sadly) many later expressions of Christianity can be found to match. As those who "sat in Moses' seat",[165] they imposed on others what they were unwilling to enforce on themselves (23:1-4). Their religious symbols, such as phylacteries and the tassels on prayer shawls,

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[163] The word **ὑποκριτής** (= hypocrite) had its general orientation in the theater, referring to a role-player or actor, and by extension, a pretender. The reconstruction of Sepphoris near Nazareth (launched in 3 BC) included an amphitheater, and it may be from this nearby installation of Antipas that Jesus drew the name hypocrite. Jesus uses some form of the word some 17 times in the gospels (and by contrast, the word never appears in Paul). This is not to say, of course, that Jesus actually attended the theater, but he could have used this vocabulary whether or not he attended, since its meaning would have been well known cf. R. Batey, "Sepphoris: An Urban Portrait of Jesus," *BAR* (May/Jun 1992), pp. 59-62.

[164] The sting is so sharp and so problematic in the context of modern presumptions about political correctness, that some scholars have argued that these sayings of Jesus were altogether later attributions by the church, cf. E. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 276-277.

[165] The expression "Moses seat" is also found in Talmudic references to the 1st century seating arrangement of the synagogue in Alexandria, where it seems to refer to a seat of honor, either a chair reserved for dignitaries or a receptacle for holding a Torah scroll in which the scroll was placed on a wooden chair made expressly for this purpose. Possibly the person interpreting the Scriptural passage in the synagogue service sat on "Moses seat", suggesting that he represented Moses. In any case, such free-standing chairs have been excavated in synagogues, and one of them is from the Galilean site of Chorazin, cf. J. Rousseau and R. Arav, *Jesus and His World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 203-206.

were constructed for external show (23:5).[166] Exalted titles were preferred instead of godly humility (23:6-12).[167] Worse, such suffocating and oppressive religion actually prevented people from drawing close to God (23:13-15). In a biting series of seven "woes", which amount to curses (23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29),[168] Jesus leveled accusation after accusation against the scribes and Pharisees.

He pointedly raised several examples of their religious double standard. In taking oaths, they attempted to avoid the misuse of God's name by employing lesser oaths in a descending hierarchy of legalistic values (23:16-22). Jesus exposed this shallow evasion by pointing out that, in fact, they were not avoiding irreverence for God at all. To swear by that with which God is associated carries the same underlying motives as swearing by God himself! The same hypocrisy attended tithing practices, where they were scrupulous to measure out even the smallest of herbs for temple gifts while flatly ignoring the huge concerns of justice, mercy and faithfulness (23:23-24). Their legalism was ridiculous! They would strain out gnats from their wine in order to avoid defilement (cf. Lv. 11:20-23) while, in effect, they swallowed whole camels (cf. Lv. 11:4). They purified their dinnerware on the outside but left the crud of greed and self-interest on the inside (23:25-26). Like whitewashed tombs, they plastered what was visible but left untouched the contamination that was unseen (23:27-28). They glorified the prophets of old, decorating their tombs, but they were no different than their ancestors who had murdered them (23:29-32).

Their response to Jesus and his disciples was cynical and violent (cf. 10:17-23), and they took their place beside all those who rejected God's messengers from first to last—from Abel who was murdered by his brother (cf. Ge. 4:8) to Zechariah ben Berakiah, who was stoned to death in the

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[166] Phylacteries or *tephillin* (Aramaic) were black leather boxes containing small scraps of scriptural passages worn strapped to the forehead or left arm. Four passages of Scripture were used (Ex. 13:1-10; 11-16; Dt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21), and the head phylactery contained four compartments, each of which contained one passage. The arm phylactery contained one compartment to hold a parchment on which all four passages were written. The boxes had to be perfectly square, sown to a base of thick leather with 12 stitches symbolizing the 12 tribes, and the straps were to be painted black. The arm strap was to be woven around the arm seven times, while the head strap kept the phylactery in the center of the forehead with the strap ends hanging down over the shoulders, cf. R. Fagen, *ABD* (1992) 5.368-370. Fringe, on the other hand, was a cord or thread that ended in a tassel, sewn on the four corners of the outer garment (cf. Dt. 22:12). Talmudic practice required that such tassels be made of eight white wool threads twisted a specified number of times with five double knots tied at prescribed intervals. While a minimum length was required, no maximum was specified, J. Myers, *IDB* (1962) 2.325-326.

[167] Jesus words, "Do not call anyone Rabbi or Father or Teacher" should not be taken as absolute, for at least the title of "Teacher" became common enough in the apostolic church. What Jesus proscribes is the use of titles for self-exaltation.

[168] See footnote #126.

temple courtyard (23:33-35; cf. 2 Chr. 24:20-22).[169] This general rejection of God, his prophets and his Messiah had reached its terminus. Jerusalem was now a city under judgment (23:36-38). It's house (i.e., its temple—which was the highest symbol of Jewish religion) would now be desolated yet again (cf. Da. 8:13; 9:2, 17-18, 27; 11:31; 12:11; 1 Maccabees 1:41-61; 2 Maccabees 6:1-11). No hope would be found unless at some future time Israel would turn toward Jesus as their Messiah (cf. Ps. 118:26).[170]

The Private Discourse About the Temple (24-25)

Following hard on the heels of his cleansing of the temple and public chastisement of the scribes and Pharisees (23), and especially in light of his final statement about the "house" which was to be left "desolate", Jesus departed the temple grounds but immediately engaged in a private discourse with his disciples about the future of the temple. This, the last section of the fifth great discourse in Matthew's Gospel, set an important parameter for the future movement that would become the Christian church. The implications of the fall of the temple were probably not immediately felt, and even after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, the disciples continued to participate in the temple at some level during the early years of the Christian era (cf. Lk. 24:53; Ac. 2:46; 3:1, 11; 5:12, 20-21, 25, 42; 21:26; 22:17; 25:8). Certainly there is no indication that they suddenly became anti-temple. At the same time, the teachings of Jesus about himself as well as his prediction that the future of the temple was limited shaped their perspective

[169] Two observations should be made here. First, in the Hebrew Scriptures Genesis was the first book and Chronicles the last: hence, using the examples of Abel and Zechariah, who come from these two books respectively, would have been an idiomatic way of saying from the first martyr to the last. Second, the father of Zechariah in 2 Chr. 24:20 seems to have been Jehoiada, not Berakiah (though admittedly the Hebrew expression "father of" must also include the idiomatic possibility "ancestor of"). The Zechariah in 2 Chronicles is not the same as the post-exilic prophet by that name, who actually *was* the son of Berakiah (cf. Zec. 1:1). While several attempts at resolving this apparent discrepancy have been offered, none has emerged as conclusive. Perhaps Carson is right in suggesting that Jehoiada was Zechariah's grandfather and an otherwise unknown Berakiah was Zechariah's immediate father, but there is no known Jewish tradition to corroborate this possibility, cf. Carson, pp. 485-486. The issue must be left unresolved.

[170] There is considerable debate about how to take 23:39. Is it a direct prediction, and if so, does it lie behind Paul's suggestion that "all Israel will be saved" (Ro. 11:25-26)? If so, who is this "all Israel"? Dispensationalist urge that it must be ethnic Israel, and others that it is the new Israel (made up of Jews and Gentiles), see discussion in N. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," *NIB* (2002), pp. 688-691. Could Jesus' words in 23:39 have anything to do with the text in Rv. 1:7? France points out that grammatically the word "until you say" is expressed as an indefinite possibility, which is something less than a straightforward prediction. The use of ἕως ἄν (= until) with the subjunctive expresses an unreal condition, which is not to say that it could not happen, but equally is not to say that it will happen, cf. France, *Matthew[NICNT]*, pp. 884-885.

so that the early Christians began to find their path forward in a way that made the temple obsolete. Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin most clearly enunciated that God was not bound to the temple (Ac. 7:48-50). Further, the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ for sin increasingly made clear that the temple rituals were outmoded and unnecessary (Book of Hebrews). When the message of Jesus began spreading among Gentiles, the early church composed a letter to the new congregations indicating some sensitive areas from the Torah that should be respected, but participation in the temple was not one of them (cf. Ac. 15:23-29). When the temple finally was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, the Christians already had made the spiritual transition away from it, and Jesus' last great discourse about the temple must surely have figured significantly in this transition.[171]

The Setting and the Disciples' Question (24:1-3)

When Jesus and the disciples left the temple precincts, they crossed the Kidron Valley and sat opposite the temple on the Mt. of Olives. All three Synoptic Gospels contain versions of Jesus' discourse, but there are differences between them in important respects.[172] Clearly, as far as the disciples were concerned, they could not fathom the destruction of the temple other than in terms of the end of the age. Indeed, they were not alone in this perception, for the Qumran Community seems to have envisioned an end to the second temple at the end of the age, also.[173]

What Must Happen Before the End (24:4-14)

No one doubts that the Olivet Discourse describes the end of the temple. In Luke's version, this end is most specific (Lk. 21:20-24), and all the Synoptic accounts begin with Jesus' prediction that not one stone would be left on another (24:2; cf. Mk. 13:2; Lk. 21:6). What continues to be debated concerns what Jesus meant by "the end" (24:6, 13, 14). Does he

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[171] For a thorough treatment of the temple and its relationship to the developing church, see G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

[172] To pursue these differences is beyond the scope of this commentary, but see D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 109-113.

[173] For many Jews, the Second Temple was secondary to the First Temple, and in fact, inferior in many respects, particularly after the rise of the Hasmonean priest-kings. According to some, God himself would pull down the Second Temple and produce a completely new temple (1 Enoch 90.28-29). The Florilegium from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q174 iii.2-69) anticipated a temple that would not be destroyed., a place built "in the last days" where God's holiness would be revealed and his glory would be eternally manifested, cf. J. Maier, "Temple," *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. Schiffman and J. Vanderkam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.921-927.

mean the end of the temple (here the "end" must be interpreted in light of his own statement that the temple would be destroyed) or the end of the age (here the "end" must be interpreted in light of the disciples' question about the end of the age). It should be observed that Matthew is the only gospel that uses the phrases "the sign of your coming" and "the end of the age"; the other two evangelists speak simply of "these things", which seem more directly concerned with the temple itself (cf. Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7).

Three broad interpretive positions have subsequently arisen. One, more typical of the dispensationalists, holds that while the destruction of the temple was truly predicted, most of the Olivet Discourse is controlled by the disciples' question as it appears in Matthew, that is, most of the discourse concerns the very end of history, not events that were relatively near. Here, the "end" is associated with Jesus' "coming" (24:3), and they take this "coming" to mean the second advent of Christ at the close of history. All the various things Jesus enumerated, such as, false messianic claims, wars, famines, earthquakes and so forth, are believed to be penultimate signs that will escalate near the end of world history. Especially near the close of the 19th century and for the whole of the 20th century, a steady drumbeat of doomsday predictions by the dispensationalists were issued under the rubric of "signs of the times".[174] Persecution, betrayal, deception and the escalation of wickedness was interpreted almost exclusively in light of 20th century civilization. The responsibility that "this gospel will be preached in the whole world" was incumbent upon 20th century evangelicals, and when it was complete, the end of the world would come.

At the opposite pole from the dispensationalists lie the preterists, who perceive the central issue of the discourse to be the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Here, all the messianic claims, wars, famines, persecutions, betrayals and deceptions were in the near future, not the far-flung future. They all have clear fulfillments in the 1st century as both the Jews and the church contended against pagan Rome. The preaching of the gospel "to all nations" should not be understood in the broad sense of every last individual, but rather, in the more restricted sense of the opening of the gospel to the nations beyond the confines of Jewishness. Even Paul could say, "All over the world this gospel is producing fruit…" (Col. 1:6), and the message of Jesus was "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Col. 2:23). Obviously, Paul is using such language in the more restricted sense of the Mediterranean world, and even then, his comment may be hyperbolic, but

[174] To trace this movement from the American Civil War through the post-World War II period, see P. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 90-253.

the argument is that Paul intended the same thing as did Jesus. Hence, "the end" is not the end of the age (unless one means merely the end of the Jewish Age) nor the end of the world. Rather, it is the end of the temple—and that end happened in AD 70.[175]

A mediating position between the two above extremes is that just as was typical in apocalyptic genre, Jesus drew together both events—the end of the temple and the end of the age—within the scope of a single prophecy. Here, the wars, famines, persecutions, betrayals and deceptions are expected to be the course of events for the disciples' whole future, whether near or far.[176] They are not specific signs by which one can calculate the close of history, but general signs of the dissolution of the culture. In fact, Jesus spoke of these things in order to discourage speculation—to show that such things should NOT be taken as decisive markers. Even though they would continue to happen, "the end is still to come" (24:6). The message to any disciple of any period is the same: "he who stands firm to the end will be saved", and "the end" need not be confined to the fall of Jerusalem and its temple nor should it be relegated to modern history only. The gospel indeed would be preached to the nations, and in one sense, this certainly happened in the apostolic period. At the same time, it continued to happen in the history of the church and continues in the modern era. Jesus' prediction can never at any period be taken to mean that every last person in the world must hear the message, since it is obvious that given the millions of people who already have died in previous centuries, such a universal proclamation to every person is not possible. Far less should this anticipation of the gospel to the nations be used to attempt to calculate the length of the church age![177]

The Abomination that Causes Desolation (24:15-25)

Already, Jesus had said that the "house" of Israel would be "desolated" (23:38). The language of desolation with respect to the temple comes from the Book of Daniel, where it is used to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the first temple by the Babylonians (cf. Da. 9:17-18), but more specifically, to the desecration of the Second Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 160s BC (cf. Da. 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). This desolating sacrilege was clearly identified by the Jews as the outrages of Antiochus

[175] Sproul, pp. 71-90.

[176] To be sure, the phrase "birth pains" (24:8) had become a quasi-technical term for the sufferings that would precede the new age (1QH iii), cf. Albright and Mann, p. 292, but since Jesus said these things are only "the beginning", his words suggest that one must not consider penultimate things as though they were ultimate things.

[177] Lewis, pp. 76-78.

during the Maccabean Period (1 Maccabees 1:54; cf. 2 Maccabees 6:1-11). While the interpretations of the Book of Daniel are far beyond our scope here,[178] the salient point is that Jesus did not consider the sacrilege of the Maccabean Period as exhausting the meaning of Daniel's predictions. His words, "When you see…the abomination that causes desolation…" surely points to the future, not the past. In this time of desperate oppression, flight will be the only alternative, for there will be unparalleled suffering. Had not God determined to limit that oppression, none of his people could hope to survive. Deceivers would abound, but Jesus' disciples were not to trust their futile promises.

Once again, broad interpretive differences mark the treatments of this section. As before, the dispensationalists tend to read this passage in light of the end of the age, specifically the period of great tribulation that they believe will attend the return of Christ. Linking this passage with Paul's prediction of a Man of Lawlessness (the eschatological anti-christ) who will "set himself up in God's temple", they anticipate the building of yet a third temple by the Jews sometime near the end of history. It is this third temple to which Jesus refers, and indeed, to which they link at least one of the Daniel passages (cf. Da. 9:27). Further, dispensationalists usually link both the Olivet Discourse and Paul's prediction of the Man of Lawlessness with John's vision of the Beast from the Sea (cf. Rv. 13). Hence, in their view the abomination that causes desolation is an event still ahead, and it will directly concern a third temple yet to be built.

At the other extreme is the preterist interpretation that this part of the discourse still refers directly to the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus Vespasian in AD 70. Here, the abomination that caused desolation was the raising of the Roman imperial eagle in the Second Temple, a nearly universal custom of the Romans in which they dethroned the gods of conquered nations and replaced them with symbols of their own. In trhe preterist's view, Luke's version of the discourse seems conclusive, for it speaks of Jerusalem surrounded by armies as a sign that the desolation is near (Lk. 21:20-24). Virtually all interpreters agree that at least this passage in Luke refers to the siege of Jerusalem in the 1st Jewish Revolt. Indeed, it would seem that the early Christians took this view themselves, since according to Eusebius they fled Jerusalem prior to its fall.[179] Most non-

[178] For a summary, see Lewis, pp. 105-109.

[179] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3; cf. Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 5.10.1. In fact, Eusebius says that the Christians in Jerusalem left precisely because they had been informed to do so "by a revelation" (presumably this very discourse by Christ), so they abandoned Jerusalem and crossed the Jordan to Pella in Perea. Subsequently, under the hand of Titus, Jerusalem fell prey to "the abomination of desolation" which desecrated the Second Temple and prepared for its destruction, cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.4.

dispensational interpreters, whether preterist or not, agree that this section of Matthew refers to what happened in AD 70.

The Coming of the Son of Man (24:26-31)

The next pericope describes the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds, a sudden appearance attended by celestial phenomena, the mourning of the nations, and the gathering of God's elect by his angels. Jesus used two expressions to described this coming, παρουσία (= coming, presence, cf. 24:27, 37, 39) and ἔρχομαι (= to come, appear, cf. 24:30, 42, 44). Once again, the interpretive schemes are widely different. The most common interpretation is that somewhere in this discourse Jesus made a transition between his prediction about the fall of Jerusalem and his teaching about his return at the end of the age. Typically, that transition is viewed either in 24:26 or 24:29 or 24:36, depending upon the overall interpretive scheme of the interpreter.

It has been difficult for many if not most Christians to see anything other than Christ's second coming at the end of the age in these verses. His coming "on the clouds…with power and great glory" along with the sending of his angels to gather his elect from one end of heaven to the other seem hard to associate with anything else. Hence, for the most part interpreters traditionally have equated "the coming of the Son of Man" with Christ's second advent, and if so, then the language of his "coming" uniformly refers to the same event in Matthew—Christ's return at the close of history. This approach obviously works well for the dispensationalist, but it has been generally accepted by non-dispensationalists as well. The carcass and the vultures (24:28) sometimes have been linked to the devastation at the so-called Battle of Armageddon (Rv. 19:17-18; cf. 16:14, 16) or understood more generally as a grisly metaphor for judgment. The celestial cataclysms (24:29) employ the apocalyptic language of the prophets (Is. 13:9-10; 24:18b-23; 34:1-4; Je. 4:23-29; Eze. 32:7-8; Jl. 2:10-11, 30-31; 3:14-16) and Revelation (Rv. 6:12-14; 8:12).[180] The mourning of the nations parallels a similar reference in John's Apocalypse (Rv. 1:7), and the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds is drawn from Daniel's vision of one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven to receive from the Ancient of Days authority over the kingdoms of the world (Da. 7:13-14). The gathering of God's people from the ends of the earth parallels Isaiah's prediction, originally given in the context of the return from exile, but now doing

[180] This same type of imagery is found in Jewish Apocalyptic as well (cf. Testament of Moses 10.5; 1 Enoch 80.4-6; 2 Esdras 5.4-5; Sibylline Oracles 3.801-803).

double duty to refer to the assembly of all God's people at the end (cf. Is. 43:5-7).

Nevertheless, in spite of a general agreement about these verses in Christian history, the preterists have raised another possibility. Linked to their understanding that the abomination of desolation happened in AD 70 is their further assertion that the "coming of the Son of Man" in 24:26-31 refers NOT to the second advent of Christ, but rather, to his coming in judgment on Jerusalem and the temple through the Roman siege in AD 70. The solar disturbances described are apocalyptic symbols of divine judgment, not literal descriptions of what happened in the physical universe.[181] Especially, they argue that the language "immediately after" (24:29), "at that time" (24:30), and "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (24:34) lock the pericope in the 1st century. The greatest challenge to this view is that it ends up splitting the references to the coming of the Son of Man into two different time frames, the early ones (24:27, 30) referring to his coming in judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70 and the later ones (24:37, 42, 44, 50) referring to the second advent at the end of the age. Of course, if in 24:26 Jesus made a transition from the fall of Jerusalem to his second advent at the end of history, only the last phrase about "this generation" requires explanation.

This Generation (24:32-35)

The various portents preceding the climax, Jesus said, were like spring leaves heralding the coming of summer.[182] Early leaves indicate that summer is near, and similarly, all the various portents Jesus described are preliminary indications of the nearness of his coming.

How, then, should one define "nearness"? If it is defined as "impending", then in the larger sense all generations of Christians have been

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[181] See, especially, N. T. Wright's treatment, which although it primarily is offered in the context of Mark 13, applies equally to Matthew, cf. N. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 354-360.

[182] Dispensationalists have often attempted to be even more specific by arguing that the fig tree is a symbol of the reconstitution of the modern nation of Israel in the late 1940s. Hal Lindsey popularized this interpretation and asserted that on May 14, 1948, when Israel officially was declared a sovereign state, the fig tree began to bloom, cf. H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 53-54. Within a single generation of those who witnessed the rebirth of Israel in 1948, the second coming of Christ would occur. It then fell to the dispensationalists to define the length of a single generation, but after more than half a century since 1948, this interpretation is becoming increasingly untenable even for dispensationalists. This whole scheme is simply bad exegesis. The fig tree was simply not the widely-recognized symbol of the nation Israel as dispensationalists assumed. Further, Luke's version, in which he describes not merely the fig tree but "all the trees", suggests that there was no intent to offer some sort of national symbol in the first place (cf. Lk. 21:29).

"near" the coming of Christ. This seems to have been the stance of John in the Revelation, when he uses the language of "soon' (Rv. 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). While he offers no unambiguous time-makers, every reader of the book should take the idea of "soon" in a personal way, since the time of Christ's return is unknown. This way of looking at it accords well with Jesus' later admonition to "watch" (24:42) and "be ready" (24:44).[183]

More sticky, however, is Jesus' statement about "this generation". In fact, defining "this generation" within the confines of Jesus' own contemporaries is probably the strongest point of the preterist interpretation and the weakest in the others. Is "this generation" locked within the 1st century? (Some, like Bertrand Russell, have so argued and rejected Christ altogether as a false prophet, since the second advent did not occur.[184] Others, like Albert Schweitzer, while not rejecting Christianity outright, certainly rejected many central teachings of Christianity, because they believe the prophecy of Christ's return within one generation failed.)[185] Preterists, with their interpretation that the "coming" of the Son of Man refers to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, strongly argue that "this generation" must be confined to Jesus' contemporaries.

More generally, those who view the "coming" of the Son of Man to refer to his second advent at the end of history have offered other alternatives. Some have suggested the survival of the Jewish race as "this generation". Others have contended that it refers to the generation of believers who are alive when the various eschatological events start. Still others say that "this generation" refers to human beings in general. Carson is surely correct when he says that "only with the greatest difficulty [can 'this generation'] be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke."[186] If that is so, then to what do "all these things" refer? Probably the best answer is that "all these things" should be confined to the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, which happened within 40 years of the time Jesus was speaking. "All these things", however, do not include the second advent of Christ himself, for as he immediately concedes, no one knows when that event will happen—not even the angels or Christ himself (24:36)!

The Unknown Time (24:36—25:13)

While the foregoing passages are vigorously debated, the issue about

[183] See the extended discussion about watchfulness in G. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 105-119.
[184] B. Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 16-17.
[185] A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 361-397.
[186] Carson, p. 507.

which Christians should be most particularly alert are Jesus' warnings that his second advent will be at an unknown time. Attempts to calculate the time of the second advent have been many, but all have been unsuccessful.[187] Rather, Jesus urged that the time was unknown—as unexpected as the flood of Noah (24:36-39). Why as the Son of Man he did not himself know the time of his return is intriguing, but surely this must be part of his incarnational limitation, not his eternal Sonship.[188] When Christ returns, there will be a sudden separation, some taken, others left (24:40-41).[189]

Three parables reinforce the unexpectedness of Christ's return and the need to be always watching and ready. In the parable of the thief, the coming of the Son of Man will be as unknown as the coming of a burglar, so Jesus' disciples must always be prepared (24:42-44). In the parable of the traveling master who has put his servants in charge of the household, Jesus stressed that his disciples must be about their assigned tasks so when the master returns unexpectedly, he will commend them for their diligence (24:45-47). If they behave irresponsibly, the master may appear unexpectedly and exact harsh punishments upon them (24:48-51).

The third parable takes as its background the second stage of the Jewish wedding, the home-taking (25:1-13). Betrothal often occurred with the parents arranging for the marriage of their daughter while she was still quite young. The home-taking was the marriage proper in which the girl would be transferred from the home of her parents to the home of her husband, an event usually celebrated with a processional to the husband's home followed by a wedding feast (cf. Dt. 20:7).[190] In this case, ten young girls awaited the arrival of the wedded couple, expecting to greet them with torches of celebration.[191] Five had the forethought to bring an extra flask of oil should the wait be long, and five carelessly neglected to do so. As it turned out, the wedded couple were delayed some time, and the girls fell asleep while waiting. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, a shout went up that the couple was on their way. The girls without extra oil saw that their

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[187] For some of the more popular attempts, see Lewis, pp. 69-89.

[188] The fanciful attempt by some dispensationalists to argue that while we cannot know the "day or hour" we still can calculate the approximate time (year?) is foolish and arrogant. Such attempts ignore the whole context of this passage.

[189] Some have understood the ones "taken" to be those gathered by the angels into the assembly of the elect (24:31). Others have taken the opposite tack by saying the ones "taken" are taken in judgment, as were the people in Noah's day (24:39). Either is possible, but in the end, it is the separation that is most emphatic.

[190] O. Baab, *IDB* (1962) 3.284-285; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, pp. 364-368.

[191] The Greek word here is λαμπάς (= torch, lamp), different than the one normally used for household lamps, which is λύχνος (= clay or metal lamp). Jeremias concludes that the implements were torches, and the girls were part of a large crowd awaiting to greet the arrival of the couple at their new home with a flood of light, cf. *Parables*, pp. 136-137.

torches were about to burn out, so they were forced to leave in order to find more oil. While they were gone, the wedding party arrived, and when they returned, they were too late. They were not allowed to enter the wedding festival at all! The final line is Jesus' warning to confirm yet again what he already had been stressing: "Keep watch—you do not know the day or the hour!" This warning is the clearest indication about the second advent of Christ: it will be at an unknown time. Only the presumptuous would attempt to figure out what God said they could not know!

The Parable of the Talents (25:14-30)

The parable of the virgins stressed the critical need for alertness, but it offered no specific indication about what was required other than the possible symbolism of the additional oil (which probably should not be overly allegorized). This parable, however, directly addresses what it means to wait responsibly. Obviously, the parable still is linked to the larger context that no one knows the time of Christ's return, and the man who "went on a journey…[for] a long time" (25:15, 19) reflects the absence of Christ after the ascension but prior to his second advent. During his absence, the man entrusted his wealth to his servants.[192] Each was responsible to use his master's wealth to gain more wealth. In settling his accounts upon his return, the master rewarded those who had discharged their responsibility. However, the one who simply buried his master's wealth in the ground but did not even invest it for accrued interest was expelled.[193] Clearly, "watching" and "readiness" for the unknown time of Christ's return is not the same thing as passive idleness. St. Paul urges the same thing in his metaphor of building materials, where "each one should be careful how he builds" (1 Co. 3:10). Some, who invest in things without heaven's values, will lose their reward (1 Co. 3:14).

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats (25:31-46)

The final parable has the solemn preface "when the Son of Man comes in his glory", clearly a reference back to the several earlier references to the "coming" of the Son of Man. Before him will be assembled the

[192] The amounts given, which are monetary weights, are expressed in talents, a talent being the equivalent of 3000 shekels (where the shekel is probably the Tyrian *tetradrachma*). A talent weighs about 41.9 kilograms (about 92 pounds), cf. *ABD* (1992) 6.907. Hence, ten talents would be about 920 pounds, a rather hefty sum!

[193] The burying of money presupposes a Palestinian background, where according to rabbinical law the burial of a deposit was regarded as an adequate protection against theft, cf. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 48.

nations whom he will judge, dividing them into those who inherit God's kingdom and those who are shut out. The basis for their judgment concerns their treatment of Christ's "brothers" (25:40, 45), and the final result is either eternal punishment or eternal life (25:46).

The critical interpretive issue concerns the identification of "my brothers", for in showing compassion and benevolence to them, the nations did so to Christ himself (25:40). Many Christians have assumed that "my brothers" should be interpreted along the lines of humanitarianism. Classical Protestant liberalism, with its rubric of the "fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man", not to mention the centuries of ministry to the poor by the various orders of the Roman Catholic Church, has made this interpretation nearly universal. Without in any way diminishing the aspect of the church's mission to the poor, this interpretation merits reassessment. In the first place, if salvation is based upon philanthropy, then it cannot be based upon grace and faith. In that case, salvation would be purely by works. More specifically, however, there are significant exegetical reasons for interpreting benevolence to "my brothers" as referring to something other than simply charity to the needy and neglected of the world.

George Ladd has proposed an alternative based upon Matthew's other usages of the identical construction **οἱ ἀδελφοί μου** (= my brothers, cf. 12:49; 28:10). In both these other cases, Jesus' "brothers" refer to his disciples, not the general needy of the world. Further, the paradigm for the disciples' mission to the world was earlier set forth in the sending out of the Twelve (10:5-15). His disciples could expect such things as imprisonment (10:17), and they were to depend entirely upon the voluntary support of those to whom they ministered (10:9-10). Jesus clearly enunciated that in their mission his disciples would be his personal representatives, for "he who receives you receives me" (10:40). Even a cup of cold water would not miss its reward (10:42)! Hence, "Jesus brothers" in Matthew's Gospel become a synonym for his disciples as they preach the gospel. To help them when they were hungry and thirsty or to visit them when they were in prison or to house them when they were strangers or to clothe and help them when they were sick was, in effect, to receive them as ambassadors of the gospel of Christ himself.[194] Thus, the basis of the last judgment is not, in fact, philanthropy, but the reception of those who preach the good news. In short, it is the reception of the gospel itself!

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[194] G. Ladd, "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Recent Interpretation," *New Dimensions in New Testament Study,* ed. R. Longenecker and M. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp.191-199.

The Passion of the Christ (26:1—27:56)

The climax of Matthew's Gospel, which is true for all four of the canonical gospels, is the death of Jesus.[195] After Peter's great confession, Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that his last trip to Jerusalem would end in rejection and death (16:21; 17:12; 20:17-19, 28; 21:38-39). Further, Matthew points out that the aftermath of Jesus' conflicts with the religious authorities was their concerted desire to arrest him (21:46). The crisis was now at hand, and in straightforward narrative, Matthew describes how it happened.

Preparatory Events (26:1-16)

It was now Wednesday of what Christians have come to call Holy Week, and Jesus once more announced to his disciples the horrible prospect of his crucifixion (26:1-2).[196] The temple authorities convened in the residence of Caiaphas, who had been high priest since AD 18, to lay plans for Jesus' arrest.[197] At the same time, they wished to avoid a disturbance from his supporters (26:3-5).

Matthew, apparently following Mark's "sandwich" technique,[198] inserts the story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany between the two halves of the narrative about the plot against Jesus. At a formal dinner at Simon the (former?) Leper's home,[199] a woman poured very expensive perfume on his

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[195] This simply cannot be said for the general collection of non-canonical gospels. To be sure, some of them speak of the death of Jesus (e.g., Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Nicodemas), but these presentations are hardly along the lines of the canonical gospels. Most of the apocryphal gospels ignore Jesus' death altogether, cf. E. Yamauchi, "Apocryphal Gospels," *ISBE* (1979), 1.181-188. Among Gnostics, where most of the apocryphal gospels originate, the death of Jesus was an embarrassment, since it conflicted with their philosophical presuppositions about spirit-matter dualism.

[196] The actual day of Jesus' crucifixion has been debated, of course, but a crucifixion on Friday is still the best interpretive option, cf. Hoehner, pp. 65-93.

[197] While Josephus has little to say about Caiaphas, it is likely that the ossuaries of the family of Caiaphas have been discovered by archaeologists. Among a dozen ossuaries excavated in Jerusalem were two with the name Caiaphas, one reading יהוסף בר קיפא (= Jehoseph the son of qyp') and the other simply קפא (= qp'), cf. J. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), pp. 435-436. See also *BAR* (Sep/Oct 2001), pp. 42-43.

[198] It is widely recognized that Mark's Gospel uses a technique called intercalation (sandwiching) in which one story is framed by another. In so doing, elements of both stories can be compared and contrasted, cf. J. Green, *How to Read the Gospels & Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), p. 108.

[199] If this is the same occasion recorded in John's Gospel (Jn. 12:1-3), then Mary, Martha and Lazarus were also present, and the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary herself. While we know nothing specific of Simon the Leper, it may well be that he is named because his eyewitness testimony stands behind the story itself and serves as a guarantor of the tradition, cf. R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 39ff.

head as he was reclining for the meal. The disciples (especially Judas, cf. Jn. 12:4-6) were critical of her generosity, suggesting that her gift should have been given toward the poor. Jesus, however, defended her. Citing Dt. 15:11, he again underscored the nearness of his coming death. They would have many opportunities to help the poor, but there was not much time left to honor him. The anointing was a prelude to Jesus' death and burial—which, indeed, would become the gospel—and the woman's act of extravagant honor would never be forgotten.

The anointing of Jesus stands in sharp contrast, therefore, to the plots by the temple authorities and their collusion with Judas Iscariot. Judas went privately to the authorities to agree to hand Jesus over for a price.[200]

The Last Supper (26:17-30)

All four gospels describe Jesus' final meal with the Twelve. Matthew, like the other Synoptics, places the meal on the eve of the Passover, the day the Jews cleansed their dwellings of leaven for the week long festival (26:17).[201] His disciples prepared the room and the dinner (26:18-19). At the

[200] A good deal of discussion has sought to examine Judas' psychological motives for betraying Jesus, some actually exonerating him. The recently published Gospel of Judas (estimated date, 3rd century) by the National Geographic Society, for which the Society paid over $1 million for the right of publication in 2006 just before Easter, offers a Gnostic account of the alleged "true" story. Here, Judas' betrayal was at Jesus' own request, enabling Jesus to escape his physical body in order to enter heaven as pure spirit. As with other sensationalized Gnostic literature, this piece offers an alternative to the canonical gospels, and in fact, flatly contradicts them. The National Geographic Society required its scholars to sign a non-disclosure statement prior to publication (i.e., no other scholars could look at the original text prior to publication). Now that other scholars are able to look at the original text, they have charged critical errors in the National Geographic translation. Some examples pointed out by Gnostic scholar April DeConick (Rice University), for instance, suggest that even this Gnostic text does not exonerate Judas. He is called the thirteenth "demon", the human alter-ego of Ialdabaoth, a wrathful god living in the 13th realm above the earth and the opponent of the supreme God whom Jesus came to reveal" (whereas the National Geographic version offered the more sanitized version that Judas was simply a "spirit"). Further, in Deconick's reading of the text Judas is specifically forbidden from entering the kingdom (whereas the National Geographic version omitted an important negative, which has since been conceded to be a scholarly mistake), cf. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/opinion/01deconink.html

[201] It is a well-known problem that the Fourth Gospel (as well as the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a) places the meal a day earlier (cf. Jn. 13:1; 18:28; 19:14), giving rise to several possible explanations. In the first place, some have urged that the Last Supper may not have been a Passover meal in the strict sense of the word (i.e., it may have been a *kiddush* or *haburah* or an Essene meal). As such, in view of Jesus' desire to eat the Passover meal before he died, he ate a Passover-like meal, but a day earlier than was traditional for most Jews. Such theories are exceedingly difficult to reconcile with the plain statement of Jesus that he wanted to "eat the Passover", cf. the detailed discussion in J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 26-84. Others suggest that there may have been more than a single calendar reckoning in effect among varying Jewish sects, and the Synoptics follow one while John follows another, cf. I. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 57-75. If so, both the chronologies of the Synoptics and John are correct, but from different calendar reckonings. Either of these explanations seem preferable to the notion that Jesus ate two Passover meals on consecutive evenings.

meal, Jesus revealed that one of the Twelve would turn against him, leading to an understandable shock, but Jesus was clear—it would be one of those presently eating the meal (26:20-23)! Judas would be fully responsible for his actions, even though his betrayal would also accomplish the divine purpose (26:24). Naturally, there was a good deal of uncertainty among the others, and along with them, Judas Iscariot asked whether or not he was the betrayer. To him Jesus replied in the affirmative, presumably in a low tone the others would not have heard (26:25). Shortly, Judas left the group (cf. Jn. 13:30).

In the context of the meal, Jesus introduced the Eucharistic words and actions that have become the central sacrament for Christians ever since (26:26-29). The pattern of the traditional Passover ritual proceeded in four stages:[202]

Preliminaries
Blessing of the day and the first cup of wine
Preliminary dish (green herbs, bitter herbs, haroset of pureed fruit)
Placement of the meal on the table and the mixing of the second cup
Passover Liturgy
Haggadah (recounting the Passover story)
First part of the Hallel (singing of Psalms 113-114)
Drinking the second cup
Main Meal
Blessing of unleavened bread
Meal (lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, haroset and wine)
Blessing and drinking of the third cup
Conclusion
Second part of the Hallel (singing of Psalms 115-118)
Blessing and drinking of the fourth cup

Presumably, the sharing of the bread and cup along with Jesus' explanations about his body, blood, the forgiveness of sins, and his future promise to drink it again in the kingdom were all completed in the context of the meal proper. Since two witnesses specifically say that Jesus explained the cup "after the meal" (Lk. 22:20; 1 Co. 11:25), it is to be assumed that the third of the traditional four cups is in view.

Clearly, Jesus linked the meaning of his death with the covenant, echoing Jeremiah's prediction of a new covenant of forgiveness (cf. Je. 31:31-34). The "pouring out" of his blood echoes the language of the suffering servant, who "poured out his life" while bearing the sin of many

[202] Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pp. 84-88.

(Is. 53:12). This ritual meal was an anticipation of a much greater meal, the messianic banquet, when Christ once again would be reunited with his disciples. The language “in my Father’s kingdom” seems to refer to the eschatological kingdom at the end (cf. 8:11).

The meal concluded with the traditional singing of the last part of the Hallel, and from there, the disciples accompanied Jesus to the Mt. of Olives on the east side of the city (26:30).

Prediction of Peter’s Denial (26:31-35)

En route to Gethsemane, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him. The prediction came in the context of a larger statement that all the disciples would “fall away” that very night. No doubt, many if not all of them originally may have connected this prediction with Jesus’ earlier disturbing statement about betrayal, but Jesus himself linked their failure to the prophecy of Zechariah in which the good shepherd, the one close to Yahweh, would be struck down (cf. Zec. 13:7). Still, the failure of the disciples was not the end of the story, for after his resurrection, Jesus promised to meet them all in Galilee.

Peter took umbrage at Jesus’ suggestion that he would fail. The others, maybe, but not him! But Jesus put it to Peter squarely: before morning had broken—before the rooster’s bugle at sunrise—Peter would disown his Lord three times. Peter, along with the others, thought such an act of disloyalty would be impossible. Still, as has been said many times, Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew Peter!

The Travail in Gethsemane (26:36-46)

Gethsemane, a word that means “oil press”, was apparently on the Mt. of Olives east of the Kidron Valley (cf. Jn. 18:1), and it was probably the place to which Jesus retired frequently during his last days in Jerusalem (Lk. 21:37; 22:39). Here, Jesus left eight disciples while he took Peter, James and John a bit further, asking them to remain alert while he prayed (26:36-38). His anguished cry, “My heart is ready to break with grief” (NEB), signaled the extremity to which he was now pressed. The “cup” was a symbol of his coming suffering and death (cf. 20:22-23), and as a later Christian would write, he “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” (He. 5:7). The issue was not whether he was willing to undergo this extremity, but whether this was the Father’s will. His prayer went on for some time, though periodically he checked on his disciples, who had dropped off to

sleep. Finally, fully conscious that his hour of betrayal was at hand, he awoke them and advanced to meet the arresting party.

The Arrest (26:47-56)

The arresting party was a combination of temple officers and Roman soldiers along with Judas Iscariot.[203] According to his pre-arranged signal, Judas kissed Jesus in greeting (26:47).[204] To him, Jesus gave what one preacher has called love's last call: "Friend, why have you come" (26:48-50)?[205]

At the arrest, one of the disciples (the Fourth Gospel specifically names Peter, cf. Jn. 18:10-11, 26) took a vicious swing with a sword, severing the ear of one of the high priest's men, but Jesus rebuked this well-meant but misplaced reaction, making clear that a violent response would only lead to more violence (26:51-52). Even more, Jesus was clearly in command of himself and the situation. Because he was God's Son, he could immediately have called upon the forces of heaven itself to defend him,[206] but to do so would have been to circumvent the ancient predictions that he must die (26:53-54).[207] To the mob who sought him, Jesus pointedly asked why they had not apprehended him in public, since they had ample opportunity (26:55)? Still, the betrayal and the night arrest was in itself a fulfillment![208]

Interrogation by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin (26:57-68)

Matthew specifically indicates that Jesus appeared before the Chief Priests and the Sanhedrin (26:57, 59). There has been debate about whether

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[203] Though Matthew is not so specific, John's Gospel uses the Greek word cohort, the tenth part of a Roman legion (cf. Jn. 18:3).

[204] It may be of interest to observe that Judas' two direct addresses to Jesus are both as a Rabbi (cf. 26:25, 49), not as Master or Lord, which seems to have been more typical of the other disciples (cf. 8:25; 14:30; 16:22; 17:4; 18:21).

[205] The Greek text, which contains no verb, is enigmatic, reading simply **ε'φ' ὅ πάρει** (lit., "for which you are here"). This has been taken by some translators as a question, "Why are you here" (so KJV, RSV) and by others as a statement, "Do what you came for" (so NIV, ESV, NRSV, NAB. NASB, NEB, ASV), but these renderings are generally driven by context, not grammar. Either reading is possible.

[206] A Roman legion was 6000 men.

[207] Jesus does not here cite any specific passages, but if he understood himself to be the suffering servant of Yahweh, as is implied in his earlier assertion that his life was to be given for the ransom of others (cf. 20:28; Is. 53), and if he understood himself to be the good shepherd close to Yahweh who was to be struck down, as clearly indicated in his earlier citation (cf. 26:31; Zec. 13:7), then death was foreordained as God's will. Only in this way could the Scriptures be fulfilled.

[208] Again, no specific passages are cited, but in John's Gospel Judas' betrayal is viewed by Jesus as a fulfillment of Psalm 41:9 (cf. Jn. 13:18).

this was an informal hearing or a formal trial, but there seems no doubt that the arraignment of Jesus was directly at the initiative of the temple authorities. In additional to the gospel accounts, Josephus mentions Jewish charges,[209] and later, Jewish tradition in the Talmud also corroborates the Sanhedrin's participation.[210] If this was indeed a formal trial, then there may have been significant legal problems, assuming that the rules later stipulated in the Mishnah were in effect in the time of Jesus, though this is unclear.[211]

Matthew here offers an aside that Peter followed at a distance and gained entrance into the courtyard to see how the hearing would end (26:58). In the meantime, the Sanhedrin was looking for grounds upon which to execute Jesus (26:59-60). Though a number of witnesses were interviewed, none were able to offer substantial grounds for an execution until two witnesses came forward to repeat the metaphor Jesus had used much earlier about destroying the temple and rebuilding it (26:61; cf. Jn. 2:19). John, who records this saying, also inserts the editorial comment that Jesus was speaking about his body (Jn. 2:21), but in the hearing before the Sanhedrin, the witnesses construed Jesus' words to mean that he would do violence against the temple itself. As a national symbol of God, words against the temple were considered blasphemous (cf. Ac. 6:12-14). To these charges, Jesus refused to respond, so the high priest put him on oath to say whether or not he considered himself to be the Messiah, God's Son (26:62-63a). Much would hinge on Jesus' answer!

To the high priest, Jesus gave a straightforward affirmative and more! In citing Daniel 7:13-14, Jesus claimed the very authority of God himself (26:63b-64)! His words were more than Caiaphas could have hoped for, and now the charge of blasphemy could be sustained, which was punishable by death (cf. Lv. 24:10-23). The gesture of tearing one's robe was a widely recognized symbol of extreme distress, but in doing so the high priest actually violated the Torah (26:65; cf. Lv. 21:10).[212] Together, the Sanhedrin acquiesced to the sentence of death for blasphemy and heaped abuse on Jesus as a false prophet (26:66-68).

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[209] *Antiquities* 18.3.3.

[210] *Sanhedrin* 43a, 107b.

[211] The Mishnah was codified in about AD 200, so there is uncertainty about whether the rules codified at that time were in effect in the early to mid-1st century. If they were, then a trial at the high priest's home was illegal (Lk. 22:54; cf. *Sanhedrin* 11.2), a trial at night was illegal (*Sanhedrin* 4.1), a trial on a festival Sabbath was illegal (*Sanhedrin* 4.1), the failure to hold a second session for a guilty verdict concerning a capital crime was illegal (*Sanhedrin* 4.1), and the charge of blasphemy, at least in light of Lev. 24:16 and *Sanhedrin* 7.5, merited an execution by stoning, not crucifixion. On the other hand, if this interrogation was an informal prelude to formal charges brought before the Roman governor, then the issue is moot.

[212] In *Sanhedrin* 6.5, it was prescribed for a judge to tear his clothes on hearing blasphemy, but whether or not this exonerated Caiaphas is unclear.

Peter's and Judas' Denials (26:69—27:10)

Matthew now narrates back-to-back stories of the disciples, Peter and Judas, who disowned Jesus. Earlier, Matthew had remarked on Peter's entrance to the high priest's courtyard (26:58), and now he faced various individuals who associated him with Jesus (26:69-75).[213] Apparently, the Galilean dialect was easily recognizable, and by it someone recognized Peter as being from the north country.[214] Frightened, Peter took oath on God's name that he did not know Jesus, and his blistering oath was hardly finished before a nearby rooster crowed his morning greeting. It was not until he heard the rooster that Peter recalled Jesus' prediction, and the dawning realization of the magnitude of his offense swept over him in a wave. He began to weep over his cowardice and disloyalty.

Judas' treachery was even more despairing. While the Sanhedrin members were now preparing to take Jesus before the Roman governor to ask for a death sentence (27:1-2), Judas was overwhelmed by his own act of betrayal. He returned the money to the chief priests and elders, acknowledging his sin in betraying an innocent man. They, for their part, dismissed him summarily, at which Judas threw down the money and went out and committed suicide (27:3-5; cf. Ac. 1:18-19). Subsequently, the betrayal money was used to purchase the potter's field as a burial ground for strangers, an action that gave the field its name Akeldema (= Field of Blood). The potter's field in the Valley of Hinnom to the south of the city may have been where potters dumped their sherds, and if so, it serves as a metaphor for rejection.[215] This purchase of the field was a fulfillment of two prophecies, one by Jeremiah, in which he named the Valley of Hinnom as "Valley of Slaughter" (Je. 19:6), and the other by Zechariah, in which he describes the rejection of the good shepherd and paying him off with 30 pieces of silver (Zec. 11:8b-12). That Matthew brings these two oracles together but only names Jeremiah was typical Jewish practice in composite quotations.[216]

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[213] While the details of Peter's denials vary in the different gospel accounts, it is unnecessary to try to harmonize them by saying Peter denied Jesus some half dozen times as does H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 174-176. It is quite adequate to simply recognize that various people questioned Peter, possibly more than one of them at the same time, and in the end he made three denials—especially when the gospels clearly enumerate only three denials.

[214] A common criticism of the Galileans was that they did not speak correct Aramaic, and there are anecdotes in the Talmud of misunderstandings on this count, cf. Vermes, pp. 52-54.

[215] The traditional site has been marked since the 4th century, and it was used as a burial place for foreigners up until the 17th century, cf. W. Moulder, *ISBE* (1986) 3.921.

[216] Gundry, p. 557.

Jesus Before Pilate (27:11-31)

The seat of Roman authority for Judea and Samaria was Caesarea, where the Roman Prefect normally resided. As a Prefect, he had the power to pronounce capital sentences, as he did for Jesus, or to offer pardons, as he did for Barabbas.[217] However, though he lived elsewhere, Pilate would have traveled to Jerusalem for important occasions like the Passover, if for no other reason, than to make sure the Roman peace was maintained in a potentially hostile, patriotic festival. Hence, early on Friday morning the Sanhedrin took Jesus to Pilate (27:2). It may seem odd that the charge was political (he claimed to be "king of the Jews"), since the Sanhedrin had condemned Jesus on religious grounds (he was a blasphemer), but religious charges, especially in a Jewish context, would have held little weight with a pagan administrator.[218] Though many accusations were made, Jesus remained silent other than to acquiesce that, yes, he was a king (27:11-14). His refusal to defend himself was surprising and perhaps a bit unsettling, since typical Roman procedure gave the accused three opportunities for changing his mind before sentencing.[219] Nonetheless, it seemed clear enough to Pilate that the charges were largely trumped up. Hence, he sought an alternative by offering the amnesty of either Jesus or Barabbas (27:15-18).[220]

During the proceedings, Pilate's wife sent him a message that Jesus was innocent, and she had experienced a troubled dreamed about him (27:19).[221] In spite of her protest, the Sanhedrin pushed for the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus (27:20-23). In the end, Pilate literally washed his hands of the matter (27:24), which did not at all remove from

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[217] An excavated inscription from Caesarea, in which Pontius Pilate is named as the builder of a structure dedicated to Tiberius Caesar, establishes his official title as Prefect, cf. Rousseau and Arav, p. 227.

[218] The trial before Pilate apparently took place at his temporary residence in Jerusalem, and since Gentile homes were considered unclean, the hearing was awkward. John's Gospel describes it as a "back-and-forth" process, Pilate first speaking to the prisoner inside the residence and then walking back outside to hear the Sanhedrin prosecutors, and so forth (cf. Jn. 18:29, 33, 38; 19:4-5, 9, 13).

[219] A. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 25-26.

[220] Some early texts of Matthew indicate that Barabbas' given name also was Jesus, and this reading is followed by some English translations (so NRSV, NEB, TEV, CEV, RSVmg). If so, then the irony is that two men with the name Jesus were presented for amnesty, and both, in one sense or another, are called the "son of the father" (Barabbas is Aramaic for "son of the father). The majority opinion of the Committee for the UBS Greek text felt that the double name Jesus Barabbas was original and that the name Jesus was omitted from Barabbas in other texts for reasons of reverence. However, the support for the reading is not strong; hence, it is included in brackets, cf. Metzger, pp. 67-68.

[221] A later apocryphal work, the *Acts of Pilate*, would even suggest that Pilate and his wife, Procla, eventually were converted, leading to the canonization of Pilate's wife by the Eastern Orthodox Church and the celebration of St. Pilate's Day by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

him his culpability. The final cry, "His blood on us and our children" (27:25),[222] indicates the willingness of the crowd to accept responsibility. Still, their words should not be taken as some sort of eternal curse upon the Jewish race. Though some Christians have taken it in this way, their sense of vengeance is reprehensible and far outstrips the passage itself.

Pilate then conceded. He released Barabbas, had Jesus scourged,[223] and delivered him over for crucifixion (27:26). The soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium, Pilate's headquarters and possibly the Upper Palace of Herod,[224] where they mocked him as a king (27:27-31). They stripped him, clad him in a soldier's red cape, crowned him with thorns, and struck him repeatedly, while offering mock obeisance.[225]

The Crucifixion (27:32-56)

Essentially a penalty for slaves, crucifixion was a grisly death. The victim was compelled to carry his own cross-piece (*patibulum*) to the site of execution, often with a placard (*causa poena*) containing the capital charges. The place of execution often had a pole(s) already in place. The victim was stripped, laid on the ground, tied or nailed to the transverse bar, and then raised on the pole, either up to a groove on the top (*crux patibulum*) or to an indentation on the upper part of the pole (*crux immissa*). Fixed to the middle of the pole was a peg (*sedile*) which fit into the victim's pelvic area. The feet were tied and/or nailed.[226]

Along the route to the cross, the soldiers compelled a certain Simon

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[222] France rightly points out that there is no verb in this Greek sentence, cf. *Matthew [TNTC]*, p. 392.

[223] The Romans used three forms of corporal punishment, beating (with rods), flogging (with whips) and scourging (with whips of knotted cords often weighted with pieces of metal or bone). Sometimes scourging was so severe that bones and organs were left exposed, cf. *ISBE* (1988) 4.359.

[224] The two best candidates for the Praetorium are the Antonia Fortress and Herod's Upper Palace. The former was widely accepted for a long time, and the current Via Dolorosa route in Jerusalem begins at this point. However, based on Josephus and other early sources, most scholars today favor Herod's Upper Palace, cf. B. Pixner, *ABD* (1992) 5.447-448.

[225] While the so-called "King's Game" incised in the flagstones beneath the Convent of Notre Dame de Sion may have represented a game the soldiers played, there is no clear evidence that Jesus was used as a game piece during the soldiers' mockery or even that this was the actual location of the event. Hadrian's reconstruction of Jerusalem in AD 135 dislocated many of the stone slabs, cf. Rousseau and Arav, p. 13.

[226] Though literally thousands of victims were crucified by the Romans, only a single skeleton has survived that can be directly linked to a crucifixion. The skeleton is of a young Jew, a contemporary of Jesus, which was recovered from an ossuary. His heel bones still contained the spike by which he was nailed, which apparently had sunk into a knot in the wood, and when the spike could not be extracted, those who buried him simply amputated the feet, cf. H. Weber, *The Cross: Tradition and Interpretation*, trans. E. Jessett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 10-12 and V. Tzaferis, "Crucifixion—the Archaeological Evidence," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1985), pp. 44-53. For an in-depth look at crucifixion from a modern medical point of view, see W. Edwards, W. Gabel and F. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus," *JAMA* (Mar 21, 1986), pp. 1455-1463.

from north Africa to carry the cross-piece (27:32).[227] The site of Jesus' crucifixion has been much debated, but the Church of the Holy Sepulchre still is the most likely choice for Golgotha, the Place of the Skull (27:33).[228] The initial offering of drugged wine Jesus refused (27:34).[229] After he had been crucified, the soldiers gambled for his clothes (27:35).[230] If Jesus wore the *causa poena* around his neck on the way to the place of execution, the placard now was tacked onto the cross itself (27:36-37). Two others under capital sentence also were crucified at the same time (27:38). Onlookers hurled jibes at Jesus, repeating the accusation made earlier in the Sanhedrin's assembly that he had claimed to be able to destroy the temple and raise it in three days as well as his claim to be God's Son (27:39-40). Even the Sanhedrin members themselves were willing to stoop to mockery (27:41-43), and the other victims did the same (27:44). Earlier, Jesus had predicted that he would be rejected by the chief priests, elders and scribes, turned over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged and crucified (16:21; 20:18-19a). This humiliation was now complete.

A great darkness then covered the land from noon until mid-afternoon (27:45).[231] At the close of this period, Jesus voiced his final cry of abandonment, a quotation of Psalm 22:1 (27:46).[232] If in his life he was the embodiment of Israel's ancient story, then that story now had climaxed in his exile from God. Some thought he was calling for Elijah, and others offered him relief from one of the soldier's canteens of diluted wine vinegar (27:47-49). With a final outcry, Jesus died (27:50).

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[227] Presumably, Simon was Jewish (his name is Jewish), though it has been popular in the African American community to see him as black, as in the 1927 poem by James Weldon Johnson, where he is called "Black Simon", cf. "The Crucifixion" in C. Brooks, R. Lewis and R. Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 1129. If Simon is to be linked to two other New Testament passages (Mk. 15:21; Ro. 16:13), then he may have been a known figure in the early church, cf. N. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," *NIB* (2002) X.763.

[228] For a full discussion, see Rousseau and Arav, pp. 112-117.

[229] Apparently, the women of Jerusalem sometimes offered a narcotic drink to crucifixion victims, cf. *Sanhedrin* 43a.

[230] Some later manuscripts also include the phrase found in the KJV, "…that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots" (based on Ps. 22:18). However, the earliest textual witnesses of Matthew do not have this clause (e.g., **א** A B D L W **Γ** **Π** 33, 71, along with several early versions). The interpretation certainly is valid, since it appears in Jn. 19:24, but it probably was not part of the original text of Matthew's Gospel.

[231] The Jewish reckoning of hours began with sunrise at about 6:00 AM. In secondary accounts of an ancient history of the world by Thallus (who probably wrote in about the mid-1st century), he attributes this darkness to an eclipse of the sun. Thallus, apparently, accepted the period of darkness as fact but regarded it as something to be explained naturally, and so far as we know, he was the first non-Christian writer to refer to Jesus, cf. M. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions About Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 14-16.

[232] In both Matthew and Mark, the outcry appears in Aramaic (other than that some manuscripts of Matthew have *Eloi* instead of *Eli*, which is Hebrew instead of Aramaic). Both forms are transliterated as well as translated.

Matthew then records several phenomena that occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death. The tearing of the great curtain in the temple accompanied by an earthquake(27:51), which also is mentioned by Mark (cf. Mk. 15:38), would not have been discovered immediately. How it was known to be torn from top to bottom (which, in turn, suggests that it was torn by God, not by a man) is unclear, but certainly the torn curtain was a potent symbol of an openness to God that was previously available only to a select few (cf. He. 6:19; 10:19-20). The description of open tombs, resurrections and appearances of the dead are unique to Matthew (27:52-53). Perhaps Matthew intends to link them to Old Testament passages, such as, Ezekiel 37:12-13 or Isaiah 26:19 or Daniel 12:2.[233] This brief passage raises many more questions than answers, and perhaps the wisest interpreter will simply take of his sandals on such "holy ground" and decline to offer explanations.

The earthquake and the accompanying phenomena were such terrifying signs of divine displeasure that the centurion in charge of the execution, along with his men, gasped that Jesus must surely have been God's Son (27:54)! Here, even a pagan soldier seemingly could grasp what the Sanhedrin could not! Not surprisingly, the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem were last at the cross—and they would be first at the tomb (27:55; cf. Lk. 8:1-3)! They had never met a man like this man, "a prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!': who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious."[234] Among these women were Mary Magdalene,[235] Mary the mother of James and Joseph (whom later Matthew will call "the other Mary", cf. 28:1), and the wife of Zebedee, the mother of James and John (27:56).

The Burial, Resurrection and Great Commission

[233] So. N. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 632-636.
[234] D. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (rpt. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971), p.47.
[235] Mary Magdalene has attracted a good deal of public attention since the publication of the infamous *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown, who borrowed the Gnostic claim that Mary was the wife of Jesus and fathered a line still traceable in France. For a review of some of the most basic historical errors in Brown's work, see B. Witherington III's review in *BAR* (May/Jun 2004), pp. 58-61.

(27:57—28:20)

The Burial and Guard at the Tomb (27:57-66)

Jewish custom, based on Deuteronomy 21:22-23, was to bury crucified victims and on the same day as their death if at all possible.[236] The burial of Jesus was accomplished by a previously unnamed disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, from the ancient town of Samuel the prophet (27:57).[237] The burial was in Joseph's own new tomb (27:58-60), which was in itself a symbol of shame and indicated the difficulty of accomplishing the burial before sunset. While Joseph certainly intended to treat Jesus' body with dignity, the fact that Jesus was buried without customary mourning and in a rock-cut tomb not belonging to his own family—indeed, a tomb that had not been used previously—marks Jesus' burial, like the crucifixion, as part of his shameful death.[238] Some of the women observed the burial, but they would not return until Sunday morning (27:61).[239]

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[236] Josephus verifies this custom, cf. *Wars* 4.5.2.

[237] Joseph must have been well-known among the early Christian communities, since he is mentioned by name in all four gospels in this regard (cf. Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50-51; Jn. 19:38-39). Mark says that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, Luke that he had not consented to the execution sentence of Jesus (possibly he was not present?), and John that Nicodemas, another Sanhedrin member, assisted him. In the gospels, some characters are named, others anonymous. One plausible theory is that unnamed disciples were given protective anonymity so there could be no later reprisals against them. Those who were named specifically, like Joseph of Arimathea, were possibly already deceased by the time the gospel was composed, cf. Bauckham, pp. 183-201.

As to the actual location of the tomb, two sites are most popular, the so-called Garden Tomb and the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. While the Garden Tomb "feels right" to most visitors (it is secluded, peaceful and tastefully maintained), the archaeological evidence is weak, and in fact, most archaeologists agree that it is an Iron Age II tomb from the 1st Temple period. If so, it could not have been the "new tomb" of Jesus, cf. G. Barkay, "The Garden Tomb: Was Jesus Buried Here?" *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1986), pp. 40-57. The site of the Holy Sepulchre Church has by far the oldest and weightiest claim, and there is no substantial reason for rejecting it, cf. D. Bahat, "Does the Holy Sepulchre Church Mark the Burial of Jesus?" *BAR* (May/Jun 1986), pp. 26-45.

[238] B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg/London/NewYork: Trinity International, 2003), pp. 89-108. For more information about 1st century Jewish burials in rock-cut tombs, see J. Magness, "What Did Jesus' Tomb Look Like?" *BAR* (Jan/Feb 2006, pp. 38-49, 70.

[239] The 2007 hoopla over the Talpiot tomb is to be discounted as unreasonably speculative. A television documentary on the Discovery Channel aired March 4, 2007 (just prior to Easter), claiming to have found the ossuary of Jesus (not to mention, ossuaries of his mother, his brothers, his wife and his child)! Subsequently, a scholarly symposium at Princeton University convened January 13-17, 2008 to discuss and examine the evidence. Though the producer of the documentary, Candadian Simcha Jacobovici, claimed that the Princeton symposium vindicated his television sensation, the majority opinion of the scholars who attended did not concur and went on record as rejecting the identification as belonging to Jesus' family or at least that the claim was highly speculative, cf. http://www.bib-arch.org/tomb/bswbTombStatement.asp. The opinion of well-known Oxford University scholar Gaza Vermes could be considered as typical: "The evidence so far falls short of proving that the Talpiot tomb is, or even could be, the tomb of the family of Jesus of Nazareth. The identification of the ossuary of Mariamne with that of Mary Magdalene of the

The request by the Temple authorities for a tomb guard is unprecedented (who would think to guard the tomb of a dead man?), but in light of later rumors that the disciples stole the body, the tomb guard performed an important function.[240] Pilate consented, the tomb was sealed (possibly in wax with Pilate's own seal), and a guard was fixed (27:61-66).

The Resurrection (28:1-15)

Though all four gospels describe the empty tomb on Easter morning, pointing toward Jesus' resurrection, there are some differences in detail (i.e., the identification of Mary the mother of Salome versus Mary the mother of James in Mark and Luke respectively; the angel in Matthew versus the young man in Mark versus the two men in Luke versus the two angels in John; Mark's testimony that the women told no one versus Matthew's and Luke's accounts that they told the disciples, etc.). While these differences must be accounted for insofar as is possible, they are well within the range of the kind of differences one might expect from eyewitness accounts.[241] None of the gospels describe the resurrection itself. Rather, the truth of the resurrection is grounded on two lines of evidence, the empty tomb and direct encounters with the risen Christ.

Matthew's Greek phrase "but late on the Sabbath at the drawing on toward one of [the] Sabbaths" seems awkward, but the NIV's "after the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week" captures the sense of it (28:1). Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" went to see the tomb. Yet another earthquake occurred (assuming this one to be different than the one in 27:51), during which an angel came and opened the tomb entrance (28:2-4). Tombs were sealed either with square blocking stones or rolling stones, but in this case, the tomb was sealed with a rolling stone. The guards, for their part, naturally were terrified.

Matthew first concentrates on the testimony of the women, which was

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Gospels has no support whatsoever and without it, the case collapses. …apart from a handful of participants, the large majority of the assembled scholars consider the theory…as unlikely… In my historical judgment, the matter is, and in the absence of substantial new evidence, should remain closed," http://www.bib-arch.org/tomb/bswbTombVermes.asp

[240] Justin Martyr confirms that even up into the 2nd century, a general Jewish opinion was that the disciples stole the corpse at night when it was unfastened from the cross, cf. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 108.

[241] To attempt to resolve all these differences here is beyond the scope of this short commentary, but a very good place to begin is with George Eldon Ladd's *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). Critical scholars are more apt to follow the lead of Rudolf Bultmann and others, who treat Matthew's account as "an apologetic legend". A classical summary of this more negative assessment can be found in cf. R. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). On the positive side, a very thoughtful, positive treatment is to be found in the English journalist Frank Morrison's treatment, *Who Moved the Stone?* (rpt. Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1976).

surely remarkable given that women were generally not allowed even to bear witness except in very exceptional circumstances.[242] Nonetheless, it was to the women who came that Sunday morning that the first testimony was given that Jesus had risen and that they, in turn, should go and tell the others that he would see them in Galilee (28:5-7). This they did, both afraid, yet overwhelmed with joy.[243] On their way, Jesus himself confronted them, reassured them and repeated the instruction to inform the others that they would see him in Galilee (28:8-10).

The Roman guard, meanwhile, hurried back to report these inexplicable events to their superiors. The Temple authorities paid them off to spread the false rumor that Jesus' corpse had been stolen by his disciples, along with assurances that they would themselves be protected if any reprisals were sought against them (28:11-15).

The Great Commission (28:16-20)

When the eleven disciples heard the women's message, they returned to Galilee to "the mountain" (possibly the Mount of Transfiguration?). Here, just as he promised, Jesus appeared to them (28:16-17). It is remarkable that Matthew boldly indicates that even in view of such appearances, a few of them still had uncertainty! Like Thomas (cf. Jn. 20:24-29), they were hard-headed realists, and they did not come to faith in the resurrection of Jesus because they were gullible and credulous, ready to latch onto any sort of preposterous story that may have come along! In the end, they came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, not because they were naïve, but because they could not help but do so in the presence of what Luke later will call "many convincing proofs" (Ac. 1:3)!

In this appearance, Jesus announced to them his full authority in the whole universe (28:18). This is the equivalent of his exaltation as Lord as described by Peter and Paul (cf. Ac. 2:36; Phil. 2:9-11). The restriction on the disciples' preaching of the kingdom, once reserved only for the clans of Israel (cf. 10:5-6; 15:24), was now lifted. They were to go into the whole world to make disciples of people from the nations, baptizing them and teaching them in the way of the Lord (28:19-20a).[244] Jesus' final promise

[242] Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, pp. 374-375.

[243] Some would even suggest that this witness of the women was the first preaching of the gospel, cf. L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 60.

[244] Some discussion has attended the verbal formula "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Was this intended to be a strictly worded baptismal formula? Obviously, it certainly became one—and very early (i.e., it is attested in one of the earliest Christians documents outside the New Testament, cf. Didache 7). Others have pointed to the so-called "shorter formula" in Acts 2:38; 10:48;

was to be with them in their mission—to the very end of the age (28:20b). Nothing in Jesus' words indicated how long that age would be. He only assured them of his presence to the end.

19:5). Perhaps, as has been suggested, the longer formula was more appropriate in an international context, where pagans would need to acknowledge not only the messiahship of Jesus, but also the Judeo-Christian conception of God as Father, Son and Spirit. The shorter formula would have been more appropriate for Jews who already embraced the Old Testament's basic conception of God, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 181.