

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Session I

Despite my compulsiveness to compartmentalize everything, I'm not sure that I can develop an outline for the GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW. I had one—sort of—outline, but then I did the Prologue and that wasn't part of it. I think that I'll just start and we will see where and when we end up each week—probably based on when I get tired.

Will we end by Easter? Maybe. Maybe not.

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Last Week's Question(s)

Not specifically related to Peter but “*Is there a difference between the spirit and the soul? Recently I heard that we are made of 3 different aspects; body, soul and spirit. I think I had always thought of the spirit and soul as the same thing?*”

Wow. Off to a running start! If you ‘Google’ the sequence of “body, soul, spirit” you’ll find various and simple answers. However, this is not an easy question to answer in that it frequently depends upon the context and location of the source (i.e. Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Scriptures, Secular Writings).

In Hebrew, the word that is usually translated as ‘soul’ is *nephesh* (or *nefesh*) meaning what makes up a person—living being (e.g. “*then the Lord formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a—nephesh chayyah—living being. Genesis 2:7*”). In Greek the word is *psyche* (ψυχη) and could best be described as meaning ‘total being’.

In Hebrew, the word that is usually translated as ‘spirit’ is *ruach* meaning “Breath of God”. In Greek the word is *pneuma* (πνευμα) and sometimes *phantasma* (φαντασμα), and the context is essential for a meaning. In Matthew it is used in three ways: 1) a communication connect—contact—from God (e.g. *And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; 3:16*), 2) demonic or unclean entity (*and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. 8:16*), and 3) ghost (e.g. *But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out for fear. 14:26*)

When a modern day writer interprets the meaning of spirit and soul, it depends upon which scriptural context is being utilized.

Did you know? We are accustomed to chapter and verse marking in the Bible, however the original authors didn't do it. Stephan Langton (Archbishop of Canterbury) in 1227 created the 'chapter' divisions. Rabbi Nathan in 1448 added 'verse' divisions to the Hebrew Scriptures. Robert Estienne in 1555 adopted Nathan's marking for the Hebrew Scriptures and added 'verse' divisions to the Christian Scriptures.

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Introduction

As you have probably heard me say many times, when approaching the scriptures there are several things that must be kept in mind. Who is the author? What is the author's agenda or purpose in writing? To whom or for whom is the author writing? What is going on in their lives? It is then and only then that we can see how the scriptures apply to us.

Our modern experience of written material is that an author frequently writes with the intention of reaching as many readers as possible. This is to potentially increase book sales and thus revenue, but also, for the simple reason that Gutenberg and the Internet made it so that we can do it.

A modern author pens a book and depending upon that author's popularity, it can be translated into many different languages and transmitted around the world in months. Not so for the Gospel authors and very likely universality was never their intention.

In this study I will frequently be quoting excerpts from SACRA PAGINA: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. He was one of my beloved professors of 45 years ago. Sacra Pagina means Sacred Page.



They were writing for specific groups of people. In fact, they were specialized in that they used words and phrases that might only be understood readily in the regions in which the group was located.

The three Synoptic authors utilize the same stories, often verbatim with only minor adaptations in order to help their intended readers to better understand the story—to make it more applicable to their lives.

Who is Matthew? Let's begin with who he isn't. He isn't the tax collector a.k.a. Levi (Markan Gospel). Nowhere in the text is the gospel ascribed to someone named Matthew—Gospel According to Matthew was not part of the first edition. We really don't know who Matthew was: perhaps simply the 'patron' of the community for which it is written.

Matthew—the anonymous—however has a Jewish background and is interested in being a missionary primarily to Jews.

What was going on when it was written? The Jewish

Did you know? Matthew is often described as the most "Jewish" of the four Gospels... unintelligible without reference to the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish writings. Sacra Pagina.

War—a rebellion against Rome beginning in 66 C.E.—emphasized the disparity of Jewish perspectives concerning the Roman-Jewish relationship existing in Palestine and throughout the Diaspora (migration of Judaism from Palestine to Rome). In fact, it is believed that the primary reason Rome was able to so quickly conquer Jerusalem—a hilltop stronghold with a natural water supply and large food warehouses—was due to infighting between Jewish factions within the city walls.

Where and when did he write? A dating as late as 100 C.E. and as early as 70 C.E. are the parameters (*terminus-ad-quem* and *terminus-a-quo*). The latest date is established by references of the gospel account by the earliest Church Fathers and the earliest date because of inferences in the text to the destruction of the temple. A usual date affixed to Matthew is 85 C.E. partly because of other textual references related to the development of rabbinism after the fall of Jerusalem.

For whom is this written? Matthew is writing specifically for Jews and/or Christian Jews living in the region we now call Syria. These people were displaced when the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem was pillaged in late August, 70 C.E.

Agenda? Matthew’s primary focus is to have his readers see Jesus as the ultimate interpreter of Torah. After the destruction of the Temple—loss of a ritual home for God—Torah was quickly becoming more important than ever. The question facing Judaism was: how do we worship without a Temple? Rabbinism would respond Torah; Matthew says Jesus.

The tension found in this gospel account continually demonstrates the tension between Jesus the Messiah, and the Torah as opposed to the authority of the “scribes and Pharisees” as the interpreters of the Torah.

Birth Record
Read Matthew 1:1-17

The genealogy according to Matthew, couched in a Jewish understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures is a threefold set of fourteen generations. Matthew moves from Abraham to David (takes a breather), then moves from David to the Babylonian Exile (takes a breather) then from the exile to Jesus.

This *gematria*—a Jewish form of numerology—emphasizes the importance of scriptural history as a series of three subsets of fourteen (14 is a multiple of 7, a sacred number). This is used to emphasize that the time is right for a Messiah to appear.

An interesting aspect of this genealogy is that it includes the names of five women. The inclusion of women in Jesus’ family tree is very unexpected in a Jewish genealogy because lineage is through the father and not the mother. This fits well with

He said give me my cane
He said give me my hat
The time has come
To begin the begat

The begat
The begat

So they begat Caine
And they begat Abel
Who begat the rabble
At the Tower of Babel—
Finian's Rainbow

Matthew's intention that the reader is to expect the unexpected—a developing theme of tension between tradition and newness.

Let's not try to compare this with Luke's genealogy as he is not interested in the Jewish genealogical progressions that occur in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The simple point of Matthew's genealogy is that Jesus is a descendant of David and of Messianic lineage. His readers would have understood his intent very readily—not so much 20th century Christians.

Birth of Jesus
Read Matthew 1:18-25

Moving on from the 'begats', Matthew begins to detail how the Messiah came to be: enter Mary and Joseph and in very Jewish terms.

In ancient times a marriage was more a civil contract than a religious ritual and definitely not a sacrament. It was frequently an arranged marriage by family patriarchs or at least between a patriarch and a young man. The betrothal—not to be confused with a modern day engagement between fiancées—was in part a financial agreement that once fulfilled, the property (in this case, Mary) was transferred to the young man and the couple were then married.

If the property were to become damaged before the marriage, the contract could be declared null and void by the young man, Joseph. Although the law permitted for Mary to be put to death (under certain circumstances), it is unclear as to whether or not this penalty was often imposed in first century Palestine.

**Oh Mary, wrapped up in glory
What are you going to tell your groom
How's he going to feel on the day of
your wedding
What will your friends assume
Oh, but Joseph and Mary were married
The angels carried the news...**
[Wedding Song, Arlo Guthrie]

Nevertheless, an angel communicates to Joseph in a dream his role in God's plan. With the angel and dream, Matthew would be reminding his readers of the ancient Jewish and biblical tradition of how God sent a message.

He also introduces the first 'fulfillment quotation' formula that Matthew employs throughout his gospel. It is usually a loose phrasing of a scriptural passage that Jewish readers would quickly remember. Again, Matthew is connecting dotted lines of Hebrew scripture to a messianic Jesus.

Then, in very Jewish tradition, Joseph—in fulfillment of the cited scripture—names Jesus. Matthew is continuing to underscore the Davidic lineage of Jesus.

Magi Visitation
Read Matthew 2:1-23

If chapter one primarily deals with answering the question of who is Jesus, then chapter two focuses on the “where” it all happened.

Did you know?
Matthew and Luke are writing for different audiences and it is somewhat disingenuous to attempt to make the stories the same.

While reading this portion of Matthew, please try to set aside any understanding of the “Christmas Story” you might have tucked away in your memory. The “Christmas Story” the Church celebrates each December is primarily a harmonization of events recorded by Luke and Matthew.

With this in mind, let’s look a little more closely at just Matthew’s Jewish version “where” it all happened.

For Matthew it is assumed that Joseph—and Mary—were residents of Bethlehem. This is important for him, again, because it was the City of David and further solidifies Jesus as a descendant of David and a rightful messiah. Unlike Luke who has to explain how Jesus of Nazareth gets to be born in Bethlehem, Matthew simply accepts that Bethlehem was Joseph’s hometown and later explains how Jesus get to Nazareth.

Matthew does not mention an inn or stable, simply a “house” is where the Magi find him. This does not necessarily contradict Luke’s manger scene, but neither does it substantiate it. A crèche-scene would not advance Matthew’s purpose at this point: the Moses analogy.

In getting Jesus ultimately to Nazareth from Bethlehem, Matthew describes events that present Jesus as a prototype of Moses—a Jesus-Moses figure. In this story, the Magi play two roles: a means of introducing Herod as a Pharaoh-type figure and a means for gentile inclusion.

Did you know?
Nazareth was an insignificant agricultural village near the Via Maris, the main trade route linking Egypt and points North.

1) The near-death event at the birth of Moses, his fleeing the wrath of Pharaoh, as well as his return to Egypt as a means of salvation for the Jews in Egypt was well-known. Although the sequence of events for the Holy Family are slightly different—fleeing to Egypt then returning to Israel—Matthew’s audience would not have missed the intended connection.

Although the slaughter of the innocents is not verifiable with any historical evidence, it is clearly a means for Matthew to further unite the Hebrew scriptures and in particular Moses with the birth of the Messiah.

2) The Magi, however, are not merely an instrument of introducing a reason for Jesus to go to Egypt. The Magi also prefigure the gentiles who are a part of Matthew’s community—he’s writing to Jews living in a gentile location.

Once again, Joseph, as well as the Magi, are directed by dreams—again reminiscent of events in the Hebrew scriptures—coupled with two ‘fulfillment quotations’: “*Out of Egypt, I called my son.*” [2:15] and “*A voice was heard in Ramah ...*” [2:17, 18].

Speaking of ‘fulfillment quotations’ there is one more in this section—sort of. “*And he went and dwelt in the city called Nazareth so that what was said through the prophets might be fulfilled: ‘He will be called a Nazorean (Nazarene?).’*” [2:23].”

Although Matthew's ‘fulfillment quotations’ aren’t necessarily direct quotes from the Hebrew scriptures, I would point out that Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures. Nevertheless, even though no prophet spoke these specific words, both Isaiah and Jeremiah speak of the “branch of Jesse.” Jesse was David’s father.

The word ‘Nazorean–Nazarene’ has three possible derivations: 1) simply from a place named Nazareth; 2) from the Hebrew word *nāzîr*, meaning one devoted to God; and, 3) from the Hebrew word *neser*, meaning branch.

John, the Baptist & Jesus’ Baptism *Read Matthew 3:1-17*

The role of John, the Baptist has very specific purposes for Matthew: 1) to link the scriptural past to current events, 2) as a means of introducing Jesus' eventual nemeses, the Sadducees and Pharisees, and 3) to establish a premise that Jesus will be an eschatological ‘judge’.

1) John is described in terms that would identify his character with Elijah, the herald of the in-breaking of the messianic age. This is done through one of Matthew’s ‘fulfillment quotations’: “*For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.* 3:3.”

2) As for the introduction of Jesus’ rivals—Sadducees and Pharisees—John is used to put them in their place: “*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* (3:7-10).”

Matthew is concerned with the ‘pharisaic movement’ that was developing after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Although the Pharisees had been around since the 2nd century B.C.E., with the disappearance of the Sadducees and their base of operation—the temple—in 70 C.E., the importance of the role of the Pharisees grew.

For Matthew, Jesus’ very being—life, ministry, and teachings—are to be seen as the paramount

interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite Matthew's continual condemnation of the Sadducees and Pharisees, we must not confuse them with all Jews. Matthew is not anti-Semitic, just anti-pharisaic.

3) John is indicating (*"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* 3:11-12) that Jesus is the introduction of an eschatological era—in Jewish terms, the Messianic Age—as Jesus will be the one who decides for God (*With God? As God?*) who is worthy of deliverance.

For Matthew, the significance of Jesus' baptism isn't related to purification rites or the such but rather the moment Jesus is made manifest as he rises from the water. *"...Jesus emerged immediately from the water. And behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the **Spirit** (pneuma) of God, descending dove-like, coming upon him. This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well please. (3:16-17)".*

Matthew understands the "opening of the heavens" as a path to God being revealed."

The closing phrase—*This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased*—is jam-packed with Hebraisms.

My son was a familiar Davidic passage from Psalms (*I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you."* Ps. 2:7). **The beloved** is very reminiscent of a description of Isaac when God was speaking to Abraham (*He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."* Genesis 22:2). **With whom I am well pleased** is evocative of a passage from Isaiah identifying a Servant of God (*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.* Is 42:1).

In A Nutshell

In the infancy narrative (Chapter 1) Matthew identifies Jesus as a descendant of Abraham and David. With the Bethlehem scenario (Chapter 2), Matthew identifies him with Moses. Then in the John, the Baptist scenario (Chapter 3), Jesus is revealed as Son of God (with Davidic overtones), an Isaac-figure, and God's servant.

End Week II