

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Session VI

Last Week's Questions

Although there were no formal questions concerning Session V, a recent question concerning the chronological order of the books of the Christian Scriptures inspired me. The books of the Christian scripture are not written in the order in which you find them in the Bible.

James	50 C.E. (possibly 58)
1 & 2 Thessalonians	52 C.E.
1 Corinthians, Galatians	57 C.E.
Romans	57-58 C.E.
Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians	61-63 C.E.
1 Peter & Mark	64 C.E.
1 Timothy & Titus	65 C.E.
Hebrews, 2 Timothy, 2 Corinthians	67 C.E.
Jude & 2 Peter	70-80 C.E.
Matthew, Luke, Acts	80-85 C.E.
John (Gospel)	90 C.E.
1 John, 2 John, 3 John	95 C.E.
Revelation	96 C.E.

Although Biblical scholars are not in complete agreement—regrettably the authors didn't date their publications—the previous table could be used as a general guide. You may very well find slight variations of this on the internet.

Introduction

No elaborate introduction for this session, just a couple of 'fun factoids' that didn't fit where I wanted them in the text.

Factoid: Scribes were a group of common people whose work was to write. Their role and profession were to write and perform tasks that were administrative. Scribes had to have legal knowledge in order to draft and write laws.

Factoid: Pharisees were known to be religious and political leaders. The Pharisees were an elite class who had a hold over the imposition of the written text. Pharisees could only be the people who were already a part of the old elite Pharisee families. Pharisees did not require any special knowledge, but they were expected to be leaders.

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Death of John, the Baptizer Read Matthew 14:1-12

In this pericope, the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, is introduced to Matthew's gospel account. Tetrarch means either a 'ruler of a fourth' or 'one of four rulers.'

Upon the death of Herod, the Great—frequently called, King Herod—his kingdom was divided into four parts and his sons became rulers of specific territories. H. Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria; H. Antipas ruled Galilee and Peraea; Philip (a.k.a. Herod Philip II) ruled the territories of Ituraea, Traconitis, Gaulantis, and Paneas; Salome I (King Herod's sister—not the Salome in this story) ruled Jamnia.

However, before I get carried away with Herod's ancestry, the real point of this story is two-fold: to emphasize the rejection by Jesus' own and to preview Jesus' death.

Fun Fact: Keeping the Herods straight: Herod, the Great (King of Judea), Herod Archelaus (son of HG), Herod Antipas (son of HG), Herod Agrippa I (grandson of HG); Herod Agrippa II (great-grandson of HG). Matthew mentions both Herod, the Great (birth narrative) and his son, Herod Antipas (non-birth narrative). Just to keep it all confusing, Philip was also known as, Herod Philip II. There was also a Herod II (prince of Judea) who was sometimes called, Herod Philip I.

We ended the last session with Jesus returning to his home town of Nazareth—home territory of Galilee—only to be rejected by his neighbors. Here, Herod—H. Antipas—is the ruler of Jesus' home territory of Galilee and he too rejects Jesus as a reincarnation (of sorts) of John, the baptizer. The flash back to how John's death came about reinforces that he has died by political rulers and executed without cause and without legal formality being observed.

Basically, John is executed for recalling scripture to Herod: "*You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; she is your brother's nakedness. (Leviticus 18:16).*" Herodias was purportedly previously married to Philip, but according to Josephus—a non-biblical recorder of these times—it wasn't Herod Antipas' brother who had been married to Herodias, but rather a paternal half-uncle. In fact, Herod Antipas was also a paternal half-uncle to Herodias.

Interestingly enough, according to Josephus, John is executed by H. Antipas because John was seen by him as a political enemy. Herod strikes first in order to prevent sedition activism that might have arisen under John's popularity.

Feeding of the 5,000 Read Matthew 14:13-21

The order of events in the grouping of stories is that the first feeding follows the flashback about the death of John, the baptizer, which also took place in the context of a banquet. The juxtaposition of Herod's banquet and Jesus' banquet is powerful. At Herod's banquet there is pride and arrogance, scheming, and even murder. At Jesus' banquet there is healing, trust, and sharing. Also, the great crowd following Jesus to a deserted place, would be very reminiscent of the exodus lead by Moses.

This event is also very reminiscent of one in 2 Kings 4:42-44, where Elisha orders 100 men to be fed with twenty loaves of barley and some fresh ears of grain. In that story, too, the crowd is fed and there is even some left over. Matthew's Jewish community would have recognized the similarity.

Although Jesus never mentions anything more about the serving of the fish, the distribution of the bread is significantly similar to the Eucharist.

Even though biblical scholars wonder if there is any representation to the number of 5 loaves and 2 fish, no one has found any symbolism to any of the numbers in this story. Simply, like Elisha, a lot of people fed with very little food.

Walking on the Water **Read Matthew 14:22-36**

Oh, the temptation of the numerous jokes that come to mind on this one! Never-the-less, the story is very much an illusion to a Psalm—and perhaps even Jonah—where God calms the rough waters. *“They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the LORD their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. (Psalm 107: 23-29)”*. And then more: *“Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to the sons of men! Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders. (Psalm 107: 30-32).”*

Once again, in this story, Matthew brings forward connections to the Hebrew scriptures, which would encourage his readers. This Jesus is divine.

Debate Concerning Tradition **Read Matthew 15:1-20**

In this section Matthew focuses on an issue Jesus had with the Pharisaic tradition of their elders. Although the ‘tradition of the elders’ was intended to be a tool used as an aid in obedience to the Torah when living in a foreign situation, such as living in a Graeco-Roman world, its use could become self-serving and was sometimes seen as equal to Torah—that is, if the Torah did not specifically deal with a particular issue, the ‘tradition of the elders’ would offer an authoritative declaration.

The two issues here, the ritual washing of one’s hands and the practice of *korban*, both ‘traditions of the elders’ which were not directly addressed in the Torah.

The hand washing practice was intended to



clean one's hands of an defilement from contact with impure things—this was a religious purity, not a health issue. When the Pharisees question Jesus about his disciples'—and perhaps even implying Jesus himself—lack of following the 'tradition of the elders,' Jesus actually challenges the authority of the 'tradition of the elders' by pointing to an abuse of that tradition.

Korban: the practice of dedicating one's property as a gift to God, eliminating any possibility of use by anyone else.

Although Matthew has Jesus mention 'a gift' rather than '*korban*' they are basically one in the same—Matthew's readers would have readily understood the word 'gift' for the technical term of '*korban*'.

Jesus points out that one's responsibility to one's parents—a specific law in the Torah—could be surreptitiously circumvented by declaring your possessions as a gift to God.

However, we must keep in mind that this sort of debate concerning tradition, was a 'family' quarrel among Jews and not meant to be seen as a battle between Judaism and Christianity.

The Canaanite Woman **Read Matthew 15:21-28**

In this section Jesus and his disciples move toward the region of Tyre and Sidon—traditionally designated the pagan region northwest of Galilee, which of course, is Jewish territory. We don't know if Jesus actually gets to the region because the Greek is to be read "toward" the region. Along the way Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman who requests assistance from Jesus for her possessed daughter.

Jesus states that his main purpose is to feed the lost sheep of Israel—consistent with Matthew's community. But once again, homage is paid to Jesus, reminiscent to the story of the appearance of the magi.

The woman's clever response to Jesus that "the dogs eat from the crumbs" indicates that even Gentiles are fed by God, not just Jews. This incident would naturally have been important to the Matthean community, given its emphasis on the Jewish roots of Jesus and the mission to the Gentiles.

Healings **Read Matthew 15:29-31**

In this brief 'healing pericope' there are a few interesting aspects. Jesus has returned to the territory around the Sea of Galilee, perhaps never entering the Gentile territories of Tyre, Sidon, and Decapolis. This would be consistent with Jesus' mission to the lost sheep of Israel. Nevertheless, people with various ailments are placed at his feet to be healed.

For me, placed at his feet is very similar to an attitude of homage. Jesus responds and heals them.

Although Jesus is not in Gentile territory, it appears that the great crowd may very well have been Gentiles living in Jewish territory. It is the unusual phrase that "*they glorified the God of Israel*" points to their non-Jewish nature. If they were Jews one would expect the phrase to simply read

“they glorified God.”

No matter whether Jew or Gentile the important response to Jesus’ healing ministry is always to glorify God.

Feeding of the 4,000
Read Matthew 15:32-39

This pericope is very similar to the ‘feeding of the 5,000’ with one possible exception: if this is the crowd that brought to people to be laid at Jesus’ feet, is he feeding Gentiles in this story?

It is also interesting to point out that in the feeding of the 5,000, twelve baskets—a Greek translation for the Hebrew word for basket, *kophinous* (κοφινους) is used – whereas in this story

Factoid: The seven Gentile nations are the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hittites, the Hivittes, the Jebusites and the Perizzites.

it is seven baskets—a Greek translation of a Gentile word for basket, *spyridas* (σπυριδας) is used. Also *twelve* would be symbolic of *twelve tribes of Israel*; *seven* symbolizing Gentile nations.

Jesus then travels by boat to the mystical land of Magadan—mystical because Biblical scholars are still arguing over its location based either on its root word for tower. It’s either on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee or possibly somewhere between Capernaum and Tiberius.

Summary

Once again, these sections illustrate Matthew’s knowledge of Judaism and how it is that Jesus is continuation and refinement of Jewish laws and traditions. It is also presented in such a way that Matthew’s community of dispersed Jews living in Gentile territory would easily relate.

End Session V