INTRODUCTION

In all ages of history, men and women have related memories of moments when they had perceived, with particular intensity, the presence of their gods. The literature of spirituality, be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, abounds in stories of divine appearances...

For more than a thousand years, the religion of Israel was dominated by the experience, the memory, or the hope of divine presence.¹

1.1. The question

On a personal level, true religion can be defined as the encounter between oneself and one's God, and on the corporate level as one's community practising the presence of God. This study is concerned with the understanding of God's presence with his people which appears in the Gospel of Matthew.

It has long been the endeavour of students of all faiths to observe, evaluate and codify their religious communities' past encounters with divine presence, through text, liturgy, theological dialogue and community life.² What sets this study apart from some recent critical analyses within the Christian tradition is its subject-matter – an investigation focused on the 'presence motif' in Matthew – and its approach – a combination of narrative and historical criticism: the fresh response of a reader to Matthew's rhetorical design, and the practised assessments of the redaction critic.

Some scholars have made the claim that the Judeo-Christian biblical record as a whole is more accurately characterized as an

¹ Samuel Terrien, The Elusive Presence, pp. 63, 404.
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account of the presence of God, acting in the midst and on behalf of the people of God, rather than the oft-cited theme of covenant. This is not the place to argue that case, but certainly ‘divine presence’ manifests itself unarguably as a dominant concern in every strand of Hebraic theology as developed by the ancient authors from their complex of cultus and faith. These understandings of divine presence, though continuous in essence, were in focus radically transformed by first-generation Christian experiences of Jesus and his resurrection. No longer was divine presence mediated through the cult and Temple of Jerusalem, but through the person and community of the Messiah.

For most NT authors, divine presence is indeed an issue. The early Christian spiritualization of the Temple is already at work in Stephen’s quotation of Isaiah in Acts 7.49–50. In a number of places, Paul pursues in cultic language a concern for divine presence: the church and the believer as the holy Temple of God, indwelt by the Spirit (1 Cor. 3.16; 6.19; 2 Cor. 6.16); access to God’s grace through Jesus (Rom. 5.1ff.); as well as the believer as inseparable from God (Rom. 8.38f.), as a holy sacrifice before God (Rom. 12.1), and, in various places, being σῶν Χριστοῦ (12x), which frequently captures that note of eternal eschatological fellowship with Christ.

Among the gospel narratives, Jesus’ expression of divine presence, pre- and post-resurrection, is understood and interpreted in very different ways. Mark is variously explained as proclaiming the risen Jesus absent until the parousia, as seeing Jesus divinely present with and active in his church even now, and as being ambiguous on the point. Luke’s annunciation story uses the symbol and language of the cloud of presence (Luke 1.35; cf. Exod. 40.35). There is no question for Luke that Jesus himself leaves his followers (Luke 24.51; Acts 1.2, 9–11) and remains functional through his name and Spirit. Many disciples in Acts and 1 Corinthians choose to live radical lives, in expectation of Jesus’ imminent return (Acts 2.42ff.; 1 Cor. 7.26, 36). The fourth evang-

4 See also David Renwick’s concern for divine presence in a less obvious passage, 2 Cor. 2.14–3.18, in Paul, the Temple, and the Presence of God, pp. 47–156.
6 Ernest Best, Following Jesus, especially chapter 31.
list’s use of Wisdom and Word personifications in his prologue also evidences some fundamental continuity with Hebraic presence theology. John carefully develops a picture of the risen Christ as the exalted and absent Jesus who remains present and active through his Spirit.\(^9\)

Within Hebrews, through Jesus’ blood, access to God’s holy Temple became the operative messianic role (10.19–22).\(^10\) In Revelation Jesus and God’s presence are eschatologically anticipated to replace the Temple and dwell among people (Rev. 21.2f., 22). A number of other texts in Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation employ temple and priest language when describing believers’ new access to God (Rev. 1.5–6; 1 Pet. 2.9ff.; Heb. 4.14–16; 6.19–20; 9.24).

Matthew has a different picture. The author of the First Gospel was one of Christianity’s earliest and most distinctive students of divine presence. Matthew exhibits a deliberate interest in this question, particularly as captured by the evangelist’s unique christological use of Isaiah’s Emmanuel prophecy and pointed emphasis on the special character of the presence of Jesus. Jesus comes as the Emmanuel Messiah – ‘God with us’ (1.23); his presence is the focus of his people’s gatherings (18.20); he dies, reappears and commissions them to a powerful, authoritative mission undergirded by his presence (28.16ff.). He never leaves, but in fact promises to stay with his followers ‘to the end of the age’ (28.20). He breathes no spirit on them, does not ascend and promises no παράκλητος.

This particular predilection within the First Gospel I have chosen to call Matthew’s presence motif. The purpose of this study is to examine the story of Matthew and this motif within it, in order to understand better the particular nexus there between God and his people, especially as embodied in Jesus’ role as Emmanuel Messiah.

Certainly the major ‘presence’ texts – 1.23, 18.20 and 28.20 – have been the focus of attention before. But what weight do these passages carry within the whole story of Matthew? Are there other elements that support this motif? Rarely has an interpreter assessed Matthew’s presence motif as an element within the full narrative and redactional fabric of the Gospel.


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1.2. The interpreter

Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tensions between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists of not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out.\textsuperscript{11}

A number of assumptions and criteria have guided this investigation. Every interpreter brings a particular Weltanschauung to the text. Thomas Kuhn’s and others’ work on paradigms has rendered somewhat vacuous the presumption that interpretation is neutral, that the text can be divorced from the interpreter’s paradigm, and that correct interpretive tools assure objectivity. Critical objectivity remains an important goal, but must be tempered by a clear understanding of the weight and nature of one’s presumptions and interpretive goals, so as to make publicly accountable our biblical and theological discourse.\textsuperscript{12}

Concerning my own stance, then, I write as an urban Canadian and as a member of a pluralistic Christian community. We assume that the biblical texts to a significant degree function normatively in our wrestlings with contemporary existence as the people of God. Scripture is seen to have application to issues both local and global, spiritual, social and physical in nature. In this setting my assumption is that rigorous investigation of the biblical text, however ‘academic’, will be theological from the start, or at minimum will spring from an ideological and social context, even if it claims to be ‘theologically disinterested’. This stems directly from my presumption that the gospel texts are stories which are written to engage readers in a process of transformation and elicit acts of Christian faith. In his indictment of the historical-critical paradigm, Walter Wink insists that the uninvolved objectivity of the interpreter stands in direct antithesis to the very nature of the Bible’s subject-matter, rendering its ancient mandate for personal and social transformation impotent in the present.\textsuperscript{13}


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Methodology must also reflect an attempt to bring the text into dialogue with the immediate world, i.e., I am interested in a ‘fusion of horizons’. Wink’s assertion that biblical criticism is often no longer part of a dynamic community, actively involved in the concretization of its critical results in modern life, indicates to some degree the results of overspecialization and entrenchment of the discipline within academic institutions. My own presumption, however, is that by means of a healthy methodological eclecticism, Matthew’s narrative and the interpreter, as both reader and critic, can engage in an act of co-creation. Acting as the implied reader, he or she fulfills what is already implicit in the structure and rhetoric of Matthew, and, acting as the critic, he or she contextualizes historically these responses, and is compelled to struggle with the issues of Christian discipleship.

The present methodological ferment in gospel studies prods the critic to be increasingly ‘self-aware’ – the attempt to read the text today often simultaneously involves meta-critical reflection on the assumptions implicit in that reading. These comments in no way certify that the reader of this study will find it to be a model of holistic integration. At the end of writing I can merely claim to have been increasingly conscious of such a need, and of the tension which exists between the parameters set by the biblical critics’ guild for such an exercise as this and some of the assumptions already noted above.

1.3. Text and method

What is a Gospel? The sea of ink given to this question by even the present generation of NT scholars has been anything but tranquil. In terms of Matthew’s Gospel, of the array of introductory issues it is pertinent to note here a few; others will emerge later.

Without prejudging the identity of the historical author, this study refers to the first evangelist by means of the masculine pronoun, and to the author and text of the First Gospel as

15 See also Morgan, Interpretation, pp. 133–5, 204–5, 271ff.
17 Recent surveys are available in the introductions of Ulrich Luz, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. Mt 1–7; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Matthew 1–7. Graham N. Stanton, ‘The Origin and Purpose of Matthew’s Gospel’, covers well the period 1945–80, some of which is updated in A Gospel for a New People.
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‘Matthew’, for the sake of simplicity. No connection is implied with the apostle of that name mentioned in the Gospel. The old consensus is dissolving around Antioch as the First Gospel’s provenance, a hypothesis which tended to strain the limitations of Gospel anyway by assuming a close relationship between the evangelist and a single community. I second Stanton’s more recent swing in ‘Revisiting Matthew’s Communities’ towards a wider geographical region including a string of affiliated Christian groups to which Matthew’s author has links.

Matthew’s relationship with Mark is most likely based on Mark’s priority. Students of the Gospels are not unanimous on this issue, but it appears to be the best working hypothesis. Matthew and Luke also appear to share about two hundred and thirty verses of non-Markan material in common, but the traditional acceptance of a hypothetical Q document used by both authors has not figured largely in this study. The First Gospel in its entirety, not merely those points at which it diverges from its sources, is taken to manifest a consistent redactional and rhetorical perspective. Comparisons are made on the assumption that they can reveal Matthew’s distinctiveness even where direct literary dependence or judgements of priority cannot be certain.

The question of Matthew’s sources is more complex than the two-source hypothesis allows, and the extent of pre-synoptic oral and written sources is underestimated in some discussions. Matthew’s and the other Gospels’ relationships to these sources are probably less linear and more interdependent than is implied by neat delineations like ‘the document Q’ or ‘Matthew used Mark’.

Structure

Numerous scholars have tried to unlock the design of Matthew’s Gospel by means of a single, comprehensive model of its structure. B. W. Bacon’s pentateuchal analysis has proven more durable than most, and has produced numerous offspring, but it omits too many

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18 On this issue see E. E. Ellis, ‘Gospel Criticism’, pp. 36–8; cf. Luz’s review and statement in favour of a Q source which circulated in various recensions, Matthäus 1–7, pp. 18–31; also Allison and Davies’ extensive restatement in favour of the traditional two-source stance, Matthew 1–7, pp. 97–114.

elements of the text from its scheme. Other analyses, such as Jack Kingsbury's threefold model, the chiasmus model and so-called 'triadic structures', are also unable to account well for the variables of the text, or are not convincing enough to have warranted significant acceptance. Certain portions of the Gospel are carefully structured by means of various literary devices and markers which signal breaks and narrative movement, but these are internal structures which are subsumed under the rhetorical design of the narrative story. In this sense it is the plot per se which provides the Gospel with its structure. The formulas and chasms, repetitions and numeric patterns, geographic and temporal signposts, the narrative-discourse patterns, the inclusio, the summaries - all of these individual narrative techniques together create the powerful drama of the story's plot. Structure thus is found in the principle of progressive narrative development.

**Method and reading**

The Gospels can and have been read and used in a wide variety of ways: as canonical validation (or as prophetic denunciation) of ecclesiastical, social and political practices; as sources of historical information about the events of Jesus' life or about the author, his ideas and his community; as sources for theological propositions and ethical paradigms; as texts for devotional reading; as liturgical resources for church worship.

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Certainly in being recontextualized in different modern settings the gospel stories perform a variety of actions on readers which supersede the confines of any particular ancient form.

A narrative, for example, seldom merely narrates. It may also inform, direct, nourish a sense of community solidarity on the basis of corporate memory, produce grief or joy, or constitute an act of celebration.27

Most scholars would today agree that Matthew was not deliberately penned primarily as a new Mosaic law and pentateuchal code,28 an ecclesiastical treatise,29 a community rule of discipline,30 or a liturgical formulary.31 The jury is still out on the question of gospel as an ancient genre and whether it is more unlike than like anything else in first-century literature. The Gospels must have been narratives comprehensible to their original addressees and hence not totally sui generis, but dependent on existing generic antecedents for their coding.32 Seymour Chatman's comment is in order:

No individual work is a perfect specimen of a genre – novel or comic epic or whatever. All works are more or less mixed in generic character.33


29 Cf. the varied adoptions in Hubert Franckenhövel, Jahnewand und Kirche Christi; Günther Bornkamm, 'The Authority to “Bind” and “Loose” in the Church in Matthew's Gospel'.
30 Contra Michael Goulder’s development (Midrash and Lection in Matthew) of Kilpatrick’s suggestion (Origins) that Matthew was composed for regular liturgical readings. See Leon Morris, 'The Gospels and the Jewish Lectionaries', pp. 129–56, for a critique of lectionary hypotheses.
32 Story and Discourse, p. 18. This is certainly the case with Matthew, given its strong dependence on Jewish scriptures and concern for the ‘life of Jesus’. It is
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It is worth noting the current shift in consensus about gospel genre towards ancient Graeco-Roman *bioi* as working models for the evangelists. I remain yet to be completely persuaded that Matthew fits easily as a subset of ancient *bioi* but am happy to see that current genre theory rejects rigid classification in favour of more dynamic genre family resemblances. In that light viewing the First Gospel alongside *bioi* has potential for understanding Matthew’s characterization of Jesus in relationship to other lives, e.g. Moses.  

Whatever Matthew's genre, in form it is a narrative text, a story. That Matthew is a narrative, a story, is hardly a revolutionary thought, but important methodologically. My exercise of 'narrative criticism' (apparently a coinage of gospel scholars) follows the parameters currently canonized by narrative critics of the Gospels. Although it owes a great debt to New Criticism, the roots of gospel narrative criticism in the tradition of biblical scholarship make it an enterprise distinct from the much broader and more contentious arena of secular literary criticism, despite similar preoccupations (plot, character, point of view etc.).

On the question of analysing Matthew in terms of the literary categories and genre of modern narrative fiction, it is most relevant to note that the First Gospel, although an ancient text, does meet the criteria for a modern narrative and can be assessed inductively as such; it has a story and story-teller, and is a narrative with an artistically arranged plot. Obviously Matthew did not consciously develop his text using our terms of story, discourse, plot, narrator, implied reader and characterization, but these modern categories are universal features which the author, deliberately or unknowingly, employed in the ancient text.  

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35 See Moore, Criticism, for extensive discussion of the applicability of these methods to the Gospels. Cf. Combrink, 'Structure', pp. 65–6; R. A. Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel, pp. 8–11; Lynn Poland, Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 65–105; Mark Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, pp. 23–34.
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A narrative whole

The Gospel is to be read first as a story with integrity and unity, and second as an ancient canonical text requiring social, literary and historical contextualization for interpretation. As Northrop Frye wrote:

The primary understanding of any work of literature has to be based on an assumption of its unity. However mistaken such an assumption may eventually prove to be, nothing can be done unless we start with it as a heuristic principle. Further, every effort should be directed toward understanding the whole of what we read.36

Such an emphasis upon Matthew’s narrative unity is not merely the claim of the self-declared gospel literary critics,37 it has also been recognized as the essential starting-point by more traditional critics.38

The primary assumption that Matthew is an integral story requires us to read Matthew as a whole text, without dependence upon any particular source theory, without dissection or prioritization of the narrative’s elements in terms of tradition and redaction.

A traditional gospel commentary like the new Matthew addition to the ICC series illustrates the problem. Through a formidable collection of data, secondary references and technical expertise, the authors have built a voluminous study directed by and large at penetrating behind the text of the First Gospel to reconstruction of its sources, historical development and socio-literary referentiality.

One frequently looks in vain amidst this wealth of detail for a discussion which engages the gospel story in the text as meaningful and rhetorically whole. This is not to decry the value of the details, but in this case the leaves, branches, roots, origins and orientation of individual trees have largely overwhelmed a sense of the forest.39

That Matthew is an integral story means that the Gospel projects

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36 ‘Literary Criticism’, p. 63; also in R. W. L. Moberly, At the Mountain of God, p. 19.
39 For more discussion on what a commentary should be, see René Kieffer, ‘Was heißt das, einen Text zu kommentieren?’, pp. 212–16.