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978-0-521-09198-5 - The Gospel According to Matthew

A. W. Argyle

Excerpt

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

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THE TITLE OF THE GOSPEL

The titles of the books of the New Testament were not written by the authors themselves. This title is derived from Church lectionaries. In the oldest *codices* (i.e. manuscripts in book form) the four Gospels were bound together and called 'the Gospel', and the separate parts were headed 'according to Matthew', 'according to Mark' and so on. The English word 'Gospel' is the modern form of the Anglo-Saxon 'god-spell', which meant first 'good tidings' and afterwards 'God's story'. The Greek word *euangelion*, which it translates, meant originally 'a reward for good news', afterwards the 'good news' itself. This is the Christian usage, probably derived from Isaiah, especially 61: 1 ('The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the humble'), which, according to Luke 4: 18, was the prophetic reading for that Sabbath when Jesus preached in the synagogue at Nazareth. Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels, because they show marked similarity of viewpoint and treatment.

HOW THE GOSPEL IS ARRANGED

The Gospel according to Matthew was the one most highly regarded by the Fathers of the early Church, who quoted it or alluded to it more frequently than to any other. It is not the earliest Gospel. Mark's is earlier, and was extensively used both by Matthew, who reproduces ninety per cent of it, and by Luke who reproduces sixty per cent. The fact that Matthew

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was placed first gave rise to the belief that it was the oldest Gospel, and that Mark's was an abridgement of it. This view is not held by any modern scholar outside the Roman Catholic Church. A comparison of parallel passages in Matthew and Mark shows that it is the former which abridges the latter. For instance, the healing of the paralytic is told by Mark in twelve verses (2: 1-12); in Matthew it occupies only eight (9: 1-8). The healing of the epileptic in Mark has sixteen verses (9: 14-29), in Matthew eight (17: 14-21).

But although Matthew was not the earliest Gospel, it has been in some ways the most influential. This is due to the full, clear and orderly way in which it describes events and records teaching. It begins with the genealogy and the nativity narratives (cc. 1 and 2). Then follow five clearly marked and well-defined sections, each consisting of events and of teaching relating to the events; and each ending with a formula which, literally translated, means: 'And it happened when Jesus had finished these sayings...' (7: 28; 11: 1; 13: 53; 19: 1; 26: 1). Possibly the author intentionally shaped his work like the 'Five Books of Moses' (the Pentateuch), Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament.

The five sections, as outlined by B. W. Bacon (*Studies in Matthew*, 1930), are

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 3: 1 — 7: 29 | Concerning Discipleship. |
| 8: 1 — 11: 1 | Concerning Apostleship. |
| 11: 2 — 13: 53 | Concerning the Hiding of the Revelation. |
| 13: 54 — 19: 1a | Concerning Church Administration. |
| 19: 1b — 26: 2 | Concerning the Judgement. |

Then follows the concluding climax: the Last Supper, the Arrest of Jesus, the Trial, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection (26: 3 — 28: 20).

From another point of view, however, a different pattern may be observed. Matthew used Mark's Gospel, and therefore largely reproduces his sequence of events and geographical outline. Thus we have in Matthew the following arrangement:

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- 3: 1 — 4: 11 John the Baptist. The Baptism and Temptations of Jesus.
- 4: 12 — 13: 58 The Galilean Ministry.
- 14: 1 — 16: 28 Retirement from Galilee. Peter's confession. The first prediction of the Passion.
- 17: 1-27 The Transfiguration and its sequel.
- 18: 1-35 Teaching on humility, discipline and forgiveness.
- 19: 1 — 20: 34 The journey to Jerusalem.
- 21: 1 — 25: 46 The Ministry in Jerusalem.
- 26: 1 — 28: 20 The Passion and Resurrection.

The central point of the Gospel is the confession of Jesus' Messiahship by Peter at Caesarea Philippi (16: 13-20). Even in Mark this is clearly a turning-point; henceforth Jesus speaks openly to his disciples concerning his approaching suffering and death. But much more is made of this incident by Matthew, who adds a passage, found in this Gospel only, about Peter and the Church. Considerable prominence is given to Peter throughout the Gospel.

WHY THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN

The aim of the author is to show Jesus to be the Messiah of the Jews in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. He repeatedly stresses this fulfilment by quoting Old Testament passages, usually introducing each with some such words as 'this happened in order to fulfil what the Lord declared through a prophet'. These texts quoted to prove that Jesus was the foretold Messiah (and therefore called 'proof-texts') are to be found at 1: 23; 2: 6, 15, 18; 4: 15-16; 8: 17; 12: 18-21; 13: 35; 21: 4-5; 26: 56; 27: 9-10.

Jesus is further set forth as the proclaimer of the highest morality, the perfect Law. Hence much of his moral teaching is gathered together in the great collection of sayings called the Sermon on the Mount (5-7). As Moses received the old

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Law on Mount Sinai, so Jesus delivers his perfect Law on the mount.

The author's outlook is essentially Jewish; his Gospel is designed to guide the thought and worship of a Jewish Christian Church on Palestinian or Syrian soil, possibly at Antioch. His interest in church affairs is illustrated by the fact that his is the only Gospel in which the Greek word *ecclesia*, 'church', 'congregation', occurs (16: 18; 18: 17). In the first passage he records the saying of Jesus: 'You are Peter, the Rock; and on this rock I will build my church'; in the second he records Jesus as teaching the disciples about discipline within the Church.

An interesting illustration of this concern with the Church is Matthew's treatment of the parable of the Lost Sheep. In Luke 15: 4-7 this parable is addressed by Jesus to the Pharisees and doctors of the law who had been criticizing him for eating with tax-gatherers and sinners. The story is there a defence of evangelism, the search for a lost sinner, and ends with the saying: 'there will be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent'. But in Matt. 18: 12-14 the parable is addressed to the disciples, and its concern is with the restoration of the wanderer to the Church. The concluding saying is: 'It is not your heavenly Father's will that one of these little ones should be lost.'

The purpose of the Gospel, then, is to guide the life of the Church, and this in three respects: (a) worship; (b) discipline and ethical conduct; (c) missionary activity.

(a) Worship

This Gospel seems to be especially adapted for use in church worship. For instance, in the account of the Last Supper (Matt. 26: 26-9), whereas Mark (14: 22-5) gives the Lord's words about the bread as 'Take this; this is my body', Matthew has 'Take this and eat; this is my body'; and whereas, about the cup, Mark simply records 'They all drank from it',

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Matthew represents Jesus as saying to his disciples 'Drink from it, all of you', thus changing the plain statement of fact into a 'rubric' (i.e. a direction for use) in a church communion service.

Matthew has moreover contrived to avoid doubts or questions which Mark's Gospel might arouse in a worshipper's mind. He makes it plain, for instance, that the baptism which Jesus received was not for him a baptism of personal repentance. Peter is praised for confessing Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus does not say to the rich young man 'Why do you call me good?' (Mark 10: 18), but (literally translated) 'Why do you ask me about the good?' (Matt. 19: 17). It is made clear that the body of Jesus was not stolen from the tomb. The guards were bribed to spread that story (28: 12-15).

(b) Discipline

An important feature of the Gospel is its full and orderly presentation of moral instruction and regulations for church discipline. In the Sermon on the Mount there is clear teaching on such subjects as the ideal kind of Christian character, courtesy, reconciliation, sexual relationships, oaths, non-retaliation, love of enemies, avoidance of ostentation in almsgiving and prayer, and so on. Later there is instruction as to what is to be done if a member of the Christian Church wrongs another. If neither personal entreaty nor the judgement of the congregation can bring him to repentance, he is to be excommunicated (18: 15-17). The judgement of the community is ratified in heaven, for where the Church is gathered, there is Christ in the midst (18: 18-20). Nevertheless, if a man repents, there is to be unlimited mercy and forgiveness (18: 21-35).

In Matthew the moral teaching of Jesus is to some extent adapted to meet actual experience within the Church. For instance, Jesus' teaching on divorce according to Mark (10: 2-12), Luke (16: 18), and Paul (1 Cor. 7: 10-11) forbade absolutely both divorce and remarriage after divorce. For Matthew there is one condition on which divorce is

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permissible: in the case where the wife has been guilty of unchastity (5: 31-2; 19: 9). Here we see the beginning of the development of ecclesiastical law, based on the teaching of Jesus, but, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, allowing for exceptions in hard cases.

(c) Missionary activity

Prominence is given in Matthew's Gospel to the missionary activity of the Church. In the great Mission charge to the Twelve in chapter 10, the Jews are given priority in the receiving of the Gospel message. 'Do not take the road to Gentile lands, and do not enter any Samaritan town; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10: 5); 'before you have gone through all the towns of Israel the Son of Man will have come' (10: 23). But although there is much in Matthew which is Judaistic in interest and anti-Gentile in tone, the importance of the world-wide mission receives grand emphasis both at the opening and at the close of the Gospel. Nearer the beginning (2: 1-12), the first who come to the newly born Messiah are the Gentile astrologers. In the concluding verses Jesus bids his disciples: 'Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples' (28: 19).

This discussion of the purpose of the Gospel naturally leads on to a consideration of its teaching about Jesus and the message which he proclaimed.

WHAT THE GOSPEL TEACHES

1. *Jesus, human and divine*

Jesus was manifestly a real human being. He was tempted, he hungered, he prayed, he confessed ignorance concerning some matters, on the cross he cried: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Yet he was also divine. His birth was supernatural. He claimed a unique and intimate relationship with his Father and the divine right of the forgiveness of sins. He set his own authority above that of the Old Testament. He

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performed miracles of healing, and raised the dead, and bestowed the power to do the same upon his disciples. Other miracles which he performed were nature miracles: the stilling of the storm, feeding the multitudes, walking on the water. The centurion and his men at the cross declared, 'Truly this man was a son of God'. Indeed, Jesus was the Son of God in a unique and divine sense.

2. *Jesus the Messiah*

The word 'Messiah' is derived from the Hebrew *māshīach*, which means 'anointed one'. The Greek *Christos* and English 'Christ' have the same sense, 'anointed'. In the Old Testament the term 'messiah' was applied to Israel as the elect people (Hab. 3: 13), chosen by God to fulfil his purpose; and to the king (2 Sam. 1: 14). But gradually it came to denote particularly an ideal king, a descendant of David, who would come to deliver Israel and reign in righteousness (e.g. Zech. 9: 9-10). Jesus is set forth as this promised Messiah. He was born at Bethlehem, the city of David (2: 1, cf. Mic. 5: 2). Peter confessed him to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God (16: 16). The crowd acclaimed him Messiah by calling him 'Son of David' at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (21: 9).

'Son of God' was in fact a messianic title. While Jesus was the Son of God in a deeper divine sense, he was also Son of God because he was the Messiah. Both at his Baptism and at his Transfiguration, the Divine Voice proclaimed 'this is my Son' (3: 17; 17: 5). The reference is probably to Ps. 2: 7 ('You are my son'), and to be God's son meant being the Messiah. Jesus himself claimed Messiahship when, in fulfilment of the prophecy in Zech. 9: 9-10 he rode in triumph into Jerusalem (21: 1-9), and when challenged by the High Priest (26: 63-4, cf. Mark 14: 61-2).

But Jesus made no open claim to Messiahship in the earlier period of his ministry. He commanded his disciples (16: 20) and some whom he healed to be silent about it (e.g. 8: 4; miracles of healing were one of the expected signs of the

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coming Messiah). The reason for these commands to keep the matter secret is probably that Jesus' conception of Messiahship was very different from that of popular expectation. The people looked for a political and military Messiah who would overthrow the Roman domination and establish an earthly kingdom. But Jesus came to seek and save lost sinners, to serve men in their need, and to establish a spiritual, heavenly kingdom.

3. *Jesus, the Son of Man*

The title that Jesus persistently and openly claimed was 'Son of Man'. It occurs only on the lips of Jesus himself in the Gospels. It is an extremely difficult title to interpret. Behind the phrase lies the Aramaic *bar nasha* which means simply 'man', but which could also be used as a special title. In the Old Testament 'son of man' (Hebrew: *ben adam*) is often a poetical synonym for man, e.g. Ps. 8: 4

What is man that thou shouldst remember him,
mortal man (lit. son of man) that thou shouldst care for him.
In Ezekiel, where it occurs more than ninety times, the phrase describes the prophet himself as the lowly, insignificant person whom God nevertheless condescends to address. Some scholars believe that Jesus took the title from the book of Ezekiel. But it is more likely that he derived it from the book of Daniel (7: 13–14). This chapter describes Daniel's vision of the four beasts, and then adds: 'I was still watching in visions of the night and I saw one like a man coming with the clouds of heaven; he approached the Ancient in Years and was presented to him. Sovereignty and glory and kingly power were given to him...'. The interpretation explains that the four beasts signify four kings, the heads of four empires. The one like a (son of) man represents the saints of the Most High', that is, the people of God. Thus, in the book of Daniel (written about 165 B.C. in the time of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes) the 'one like a (son of) man' represents the community of the faithful.

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The book of Daniel is the only one which Jesus actually alludes to when speaking of himself as the Son of Man (Matt. 24: 30, cf. Mark 13: 26; Matt. 26: 64, cf. Mark 14: 62). It is reasonable therefore to infer that it was the book of Daniel that he had in mind when he used the title. The title occurs also in a messianic sense in a work called *The Similitudes of Enoch*, but it is doubtful whether this was pre-Christian. T. W. Manson believed that Jesus used the title at first in the community sense which we find in Daniel, and meant by it not only himself, but also the community of his disciples. But Jesus seems always to use it to mean himself. For instance, in Matt. 9: 6, Mark 2: 10 ('the Son of Man has the right on earth to forgive sins'), he is claiming for himself the divine authority to forgive sins. In Matt. 12: 8, Mark 2: 28 ('the Son of Man is sovereign over the Sabbath'), he again appears to mean himself. Jesus uses the term again in the predictions of his suffering and cross, where it clearly means himself.

Yet there is an element of truth in Manson's contention. Jesus seems in all the above instances to associate his disciples with himself. Although only God and Jesus can forgive sins in an absolute sense, Jesus teaches his disciples that they must forgive one another (Matt. 6: 14-15; 18: 21-2). When Jesus declared the Son of Man to be sovereign over the Sabbath, it was his disciples' action in plucking corn on the Sabbath that he was defending. Jesus not only predicted his own sufferings as Son of Man, he also taught that if a man would be his disciple, he must suffer and take up his cross (Matt. 16: 24; Mark 8: 34). Nevertheless, the direct reference of the title Son of Man is to Jesus himself.

Jesus uses the title in three ways: (1) to refer to himself as he is at the time of speaking, e.g. 8: 20; (2) to predict his coming Passion, e.g. 17: 12; (3) to predict his coming in glory and triumph and judgement, e.g. 16: 28. This coming (Greek *parousia*) would bring to an end 'this present evil age' and establish the kingdom of God completely.

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*What the Gospel Teaches*4. *The kingdom of Heaven*(a) *Jewish background*

The central theme of the preaching and teaching of Jesus was 'the kingdom of God', or, as Matthew prefers to say 'the kingdom of Heaven'. 'Heaven' in this phrase is a reverent synonym for God, in accordance with the Jewish habit of not mentioning God directly. The Greek word for 'kingdom' is *basileia* which is used in the Gospels as a translation of the Hebrew *malkūth* (Aramaic *malkūtha*) meaning 'sovereignty', 'kingly rule'. It does not denote a territory, though it does of course imply a community of subjects over whom God reigns.

From the Old Testament the Jews of Jesus' time derived a threefold conception of the kingdom of God.

(1) *It is eternal*: e.g. Ps. 145: 13

Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and thy dominion stands for all generations.

and universal: e.g. Ps. 103: 19

The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
his kingly power over the whole world.

(2) *It is, however, only partially recognized on earth*. Since God reigns eternally and universally, he is by right king of the whole world, but much of the world does not recognize nor obey his sovereignty; so that his kingdom is not yet realized in fact. Israel is the special people of God, and among them his rule is realized in so far as they obey his commandments revealed in the Law. According to the rabbis, if a man daily recites Deut. 6: 4, 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, one LORD', known as the *Shema* ('hear'), he is said to 'take upon himself the yoke of the divine sovereignty'.

(3) *Its full consummation is in the future*. While the Jews believed that God was already king *by right*, they acknowledged that his reign was not yet universal *in fact*. The full consummation of the kingdom lay in the future. It would be established