

Introduction

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THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST STUDIED and most influential books of the New Testament. Although a few matters remain controversial, there is generally more agreement among scholars regarding fundamental critical questions concerning Matthew than would be the case with Mark, Luke, or John, and this allows for a breadth of discussion that does not get stalled before it has a chance to begin. Furthermore, Matthew's Gospel probably had more influence on the development of Christian theology than the other Synoptic Gospels, and for this reason it continues to be a primary text for ecumenical and doctrinal discussions.

ACADEMIC STUDY OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

The academic field of New Testament study has developed into a discipline that encompasses different approaches and employs a variety of methods. Thus, students of Matthew's Gospel will discover that interpretive claims regarding the book have been arrived at by different avenues. Sometimes, at least, what appear to be conflicting interpretations of the book are simply responses to different questions.

To illustrate this, let us imagine that a student asks, "What is the meaning of Matthew 5:5 ('Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth')?" Three scholars might answer this question differently. One might try to explain what Jesus meant when he said this to a group of Galilean peasants sometime around c.e. 30. Another might seek to explain why the author of Matthew's Gospel included this "Jesus quote" in the book that he composed for Christians living in the city of Antioch

around c.e. 85. And a third scholar might offer some ideas about what this verse of scripture means for modern Christians living in the world today. All three scholars would think that they were answering the student's question but they would have different insights to offer regarding the meaning of Matthew 5:5, and they may have arrived at those insights through the use of different exegetical methods.

This book offers students a primer on six approaches that are often used in Matthean studies today. In each case, the approach itself is first discussed in some detail: the theoretical basis for the approach is presented and basic principles and procedures are outlined. In fairly short compass, the reader will learn both *why* scholars use the approach and *how* they do so. Then, each chapter turns its attention to the Gospel of Matthew, explicating how an approach that is used in New Testament studies generally is employed in study of this one particular book. Application of the approach is illustrated with reference to a specific Matthean text: three approaches are applied to the story of the resurrection of Jesus in Matthew 27:57–28:15, and another three are applied to the account of Jesus healing the servant (or son) of a centurion in Matthew 8:5–13.

By way of introduction, we will say something about all six of these approaches now so that the reader can get “the big picture” of methodological diversity before focusing on each approach individually. Initially however, we should consider what all the approaches have in common. There are certain fundamental aspects to Gospel study employed by scholars who use any or all these approaches.

First, all Matthew scholars study the Gospel in Greek, not in English (or any other translation). This means that, whatever approach they are using, Matthew scholars often must rely on the insights of people with expertise in such fields as linguistics, philology, and semantics. They need to determine the meaning (or, often, the possible “range of meanings”) for each individual word, and they need to determine the effect of grammatical and syntactical constructions that bring the words into relationship with each other to form phrases, sentences, and larger linguistic units. When the author of Matthew's Gospel uses the genitive case, scholars will ask what type of genitive construction is intended (e.g., does the expression *theou tou zōntos* in Matt. 16:16 mean “God of the living” or “the living God”?). Likewise, they will enquire as to what kind of action is implied by the use of various verb tenses (especially

since, in Greek, verb tenses do not always correlate with *time* as closely as they might in English). Further, scholars often want to compare the way words are used in Matthew's Gospel with the way they are used in other ancient writings: does Matthew's Gospel use the word *ekklēsia* ("church") the way Roman authors used it to refer to a general assembly of people, or does he use it the way Paul used it to refer to a specific Christian congregation, or the way later Christian writers used it to refer to "all believers in Christ"?

Second, virtually all Matthew scholars would agree that the version of Matthew's Gospel they are interested in studying is that which comes closest to the original manuscript produced by the evangelist. Of course, we do not have that original manuscript; we have only copies of copies that were made over the years. In fact, we have thousands of copies, dating from the fourth century through the fourteenth century; and no two are exactly alike. Scholars do not just pick one of those copies and comment on it; instead, they work with a composite manuscript that has been painstakingly reconstructed by *text critics*, scholars who have examined all the various copies of Matthew's Gospel and determined which words are most likely to represent the original reading of the text. The current version of this composite manuscript is published as both the twenty-seventh revised edition of the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* and the fourth revised edition of the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*. Almost all Matthew scholars today would view their task as being to interpret this reconstructed text of Matthew's Gospel – a version believed to be very close to what was contained in the original manuscript – but we should also note that at numerous junctures this reconstructed Greek text of Matthew lists "variant readings" derived from possibly reliable manuscripts. For example, many of our most reliable manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel list a man named Thaddaeus as being among Jesus's twelve disciples in Matthew 10:3, but some usually reliable manuscripts give that man's name as Lebbaeus (or, sometimes, as "Lebbaeus called Thaddaeus"). Text critics may conclude that the disciple's name was *probably* Thaddaeus, but that this is not a sure thing; the "variant reading" (Lebbaeus) *could* be correct. Thus, Matthew scholars are attentive not only to the main text of Matthew that has been reconstructed by text critics but also to the numerous variants that represent possibly correct readings.

Finally, all Matthew scholars are interested in knowing as much as possible about the world in which this book was written and the world about which it reports. Many Matthew scholars would not know how to excavate a city or date a piece of pottery, but they regularly rely on the insights of archaeologists and other ancient historians who do know how to do these things and who are able to provide them with reliable data concerning the first-century world. Matthew scholars also study the libraries of ancient literature (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls and the writings of first-century authors like Josephus, Philo, Seutonius, and Tacitus). Basically, Matthew scholars need to be well informed with regard to at least two historical contexts: first, and most obviously, they need to know as much as possible about the culture of Palestine during the time of Jesus: what did Pharisees and Sadducees believe? Who were the Samaritans? What did centurions do? How was a synagogue constructed and what sort of activities were held there? But Matthew scholars also need to know about the Greco-Roman environment in which this book was written some fifty years *after* the time of Jesus: how did Jewish and Gentile Christians relate to each other and how did they relate to Jewish neighbors who did *not* believe in Jesus? How had they been affected by the persecution of believers in Rome in the mid-60s? What did they think of the Jewish war with Rome and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple?

In a nutshell, all Matthew scholars are attentive to basic questions of *text* and *context*. They are committed to studying the most reliable text of Matthew's Gospel that can be produced, to understanding it in its original language, and to interpreting it in light of accurate data regarding the story it presents and the circumstances of those for whom the book was originally written. Scholars who respect these fundamental concerns, however, may differ greatly with regard to which approach and interpretive method they adopt for their study.

THE FIRST THREE APPROACHES

Our first three approaches may be understood in terms of a somewhat simplistic paradigm. It is often said that interpretation of the Bible (or of any literary work for that matter) involves the analysis of a "communication event." An *author* (in this case, the person we call

“Matthew” – though we do not actually know who he was or what his name might have been) composes a *text* (in this case, the book we call “the Gospel of Matthew”) to be received by *readers* (initially, Christians who lived in the Roman Empire during the latter part of the first century C.E., but, eventually, all sorts of people who would live in many different places and times). Students trying to make sense of different approaches to Gospel study might find it helpful to start out by thinking that the historical-critical method emphasizes the *author* part of this triad, while literary approaches emphasize the *text* aspect, and feminist approaches focus on the *reader*. Ultimately, this scheme breaks down, and if taken in an absolute sense, it can be misleading. Still, it does provide an initial perspective that can be fine-tuned with appropriate caveats later on.

The Historical-Critical Method

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1980s, the historical-critical method was the dominant approach to academic study of Matthew’s Gospel. The method (or more properly, group of methods) developed as a product of Enlightenment thinking and as a reaction against dogmatic interpretation of scripture according to which the Bible was simply mined as a resource for supporting the doctrinal views of various Christian sects. When applied to the Gospel of Matthew, the goal of historical-critical studies was either to determine what actually happened (a topic treated later under “Historical Jesus Studies”) or to discern what the author of this book intended to communicate by writing such a work. One of the great benefits of this methodology was that it allowed scholars with divergent confessional views to work together in pursuit of common goals. While Roman Catholic scholars might continue to believe that Matthew 16:17–19 provides a sound biblical *basis* for the doctrine of the papacy, they could at least agree with Protestant interpreters that the primary intention of the historical author of Matthew’s Gospel was not to establish such an institution (which he could hardly have envisioned, since he thought the world was coming to an end). Likewise, John the Baptist’s brief reference to one who would “baptize with the Holy Spirit” (3:11) was not intended as an endorsement of Pentecostal revivalism, nor was Jesus’s call to “be perfect” (5:48) intended as an expression of Wesleyan views on sanctification, nor was this Gospel’s single reference

to a primitive baptismal formula (28:19) intended as a summation of post-Nicene Trinitarian theology. Without necessarily challenging the legitimacy of the Bible being used in dogmatic and devotional ways, the development of the historical-critical method established parameters for the Bible to be used in nondogmatic, nondevotional ways. Although the historical-critical method entailed many aspects (including source, form, and genre criticism), the discipline known as redaction criticism would ultimately prove to be most significant for Matthean studies. By the mid-twentieth century, most Gospel scholars had become convinced that the author of Matthew's Gospel had actually used a copy of Mark's Gospel as one of his sources and had edited that volume in obvious, discernible ways. By tracing that editorial activity, redaction critics discovered that they had a fairly objective and intelligible means for discovering clues to Matthew's priorities and preferences. In fact, Matthew's redactional tendencies proved so accessible that his Gospel would become the preferred text for pedagogical instruction in the historical-critical method.

Literary Approaches

Around 1980, the interests of many scholars who had been trained in the historical-critical method shifted away from what they regarded as an "obsession with authorial intent" toward a more intense focus on literary dynamics of "the text itself." Most of these scholars borrowed heavily from movements in the secular field of modern literary criticism, including structuralism, narratology, and a discipline called New Criticism. All these approaches maintained that authors create texts that ultimately transcend their explicit intentions; texts come to mean things the author did not envision, and so *meaning* should not be constrained by authorial intent but should be determined by analysis of a work's literary features. A play is judged to be a tragedy because it has the literary characteristics of a tragedy (not because its author is known to have intended the work to be tragic). The meaning of a poem needs to be determined through engagement of the poem itself, apart from any biographical information regarding the poet or extraneous knowledge concerning circumstances of the poem's composition: the poet's life and circumstances might be interesting for other reasons, but the meaning of the *poem* is arrived at by analyzing it as a freestanding work of art.

One reason that this approach to literature caught on in Matthean studies was that, in the case of Matthew's Gospel, very little can be known with certainty about the author's intentions; the Gospel of Matthew is anonymous and its author gave no interviews. A focus on "literary features" rather than authorial intent seemed to many scholars to involve less guesswork. This penchant for objectivity did not last long, however, because by the end of the twentieth century secular literary criticism had shifted decisively away from a focus on "texts" toward a new orientation on readers. The main interest of literary theorists was now in *reception*, and it was often said that *readers* ultimately determine what any text means (regardless of what an author might have intended or what textual dynamics might imply). Biblical studies sometimes followed suit and various reader-oriented literary approaches were employed for interpretation of the Gospels. Still, in Matthean studies, the most popular literary approach would remain "narrative criticism," a basically text-oriented method that seeks to understand the Gospel from the perspective of an "implied reader" reconstructed from the text itself.

Feminist Approaches

In many ways feminist approaches to biblical studies developed ahead of the curve with regard to the just-mentioned growing interest in reception. This might not be immediately obvious because, in a certain sense, "feminist approaches" remains a transcendent category that overlaps all the other approaches discussed in this book: there are feminist scholars who use the historical-critical method; there are feminist scholars who use literary and/or social-scientific approaches; and there are feminist scholars who pursue historical Jesus studies and postcolonial criticism. Still, most varieties of feminist criticism are attentive to one significant aspect of *reception*: virtually all feminist critics attempt to discern how texts are received by one particular subset of readers, namely readers whose understanding of the text is informed by feminism. Thus, feminist historical critics may not be content simply to identify the authorial intention of a Matthean text; they may want to dialogue with that intention, challenge it, resist it, or simply identify circumstances that allow the author's intention to be viewed in broader scope. Feminist literary critics may be especially attuned to noticing textual dynamics related to gender

or, indeed, to dynamics that are informed by particular understandings of gender.

THREE MORE APPROACHES

The next three approaches to be considered in this book might be envisioned as focusing on contexts for the communication event described previously. Historical Jesus studies is usually said to focus on “the world behind the text,” that is, on what happened in the world before the Gospel of Matthew was written (on the words and deeds of Jesus to which the Gospel claims to bear witness). Postcolonial criticism is often said to focus on “the world in front of the text,” that is, on what has happened in the world *since* the Gospel of Matthew was written (on decisive changes in perspective and ideology that affect how that book is now understood). In between these two, we will consider social-scientific approaches, which often focus on other analogous worlds that help to shed light on all contexts associated with Matthew’s Gospel.

Historical Jesus Studies

The main character of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus, is regarded as a significant historical figure in ways that transcend the interests of theology or religious faith. Historians who want to study Jesus use documents like the Gospel of Matthew in the same manner they would use other primary sources from ancient history: they analyze the book in order to extract information pertinent to a credible reconstruction of who Jesus was and what happened in the world because of him. The goal of historical Jesus studies, then, is not to understand the Gospel of Matthew itself, but to use the Gospel of Matthew to understand the historical phenomena to which it testifies. Historical science is skeptical by nature, and historians are generally cautious about accepting unsubstantiated reports from authors who are reporting things that would have helped to promote their particular cause. Thus, from a historian’s perspective, Matthew’s Gospel must be classed as “religious propaganda,” and what it reports must be tested in accord with various criteria to see if it can be deemed historically credible apart from biases of religious faith. In doing this, most historians recognize that Jesus might have said and done things reported in the New Testament that cannot be regarded as historical,

simply because there is insufficient evidence to verify or confirm what is reported there. The search for “the historical Jesus” is basically a quest for the “historically verifiable Jesus.” Still, as a result of such studies, a considerable amount of material in Matthew’s Gospel – especially that which is associated with the “Q source” – has been deemed to be of extraordinary value for reconstructing a credible and verifiable portrait of the historical Jesus.

Social-Scientific Approaches

Scholars who use social-scientific approaches to study Matthew’s Gospel draw on a number of theories and models derived from the fields of sociology and anthropology. As with the “historical-critical method” and “historical Jesus studies” the goals of social-scientific study are generally historical in nature: scholars who use these approaches want to understand the world that produced the Gospel of Matthew and the world that is described in that book, but the understanding they seek goes deeper than a simple discovery of “what happened” or “the message the author (writer) intended to convey.” They seek to understand the values, institutions, social systems, and interconnected relationships that are intrinsic to the New Testament world and to read the Gospel of Matthew in light of that understanding. At one level, such scholars are attentive to matters that characterized the social world of the Roman Empire during the New Testament era: the phenomenon of the *Pax Romana*, the diaspora migrations of Jewish people, the military occupation of Palestine, and an economic system that virtually eliminated the middle class. They also study such cultural phenomena as kinship relations, power structures, gender roles, economic systems, and strategies for education. With regard to Matthew’s Gospel, they have analyzed the purity codes that defined what most people considered to be “clean” and “unclean” and the social value system that led people to prize acquisition of honor above all else. It is sometimes said that those who employ social-scientific approaches seek to become “considerate readers” of Matthew’s Gospel, readers who try to bridge the cultural distance between themselves and the Gospel so that they will understand it on its own terms. The means for doing this are varied but often involve comparative analysis of societies similar to those that formed contexts for Jesus and for the author of Matthew’s Gospel.

Postcolonial Criticism

The discipline that has come to be called postcolonial biblical criticism did not come to the fore until the last few years of the twentieth century, but it quickly achieved recognition as an important new approach to biblical studies. In broad terms, postcolonial criticism might be categorized as a subset of what is called “ideological criticism,” a field that gained respect within the guild of biblical studies after the popularity of literary approaches brought a new interest in the role that readers play in interpretation. A multitude of ideological approaches emerged that sought to explore how biblical writings might be interpreted when they are read from particular ideological perspectives. Marxist criticism, Jungian criticism, “womanist criticism” (interpreting texts from the perspective of African-American women), and many other specific types of ideological criticism seek to put forward interpretations that other scholars may miss due to the limitations of their own, usually unacknowledged, ideological perspectives. Postcolonial criticism offers interpretations from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed people of the earth, especially those in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The term derives from the fact that the perspectives represented are those of people who were recently “colonized” by a dominant “imperial” power. In studies of Matthew, postcolonial critics seek to recover “silenced voices” in the history and culture of Gospel interpretation and in the Gospel itself. The process of doing this often involves contesting presuppositions and either exposing or accenting the political implications of dominant interpretations of the Gospel. For example, postcolonial critics seek to articulate the view that Matthew’s Gospel takes toward imperial power (the Roman Empire) and toward those who were subordinated and dominated by that power. A key question concerns whether Matthew’s Gospel offers a legitimization of imperialism that must be actively resisted and overcome by critics committed to social change or whether Matthew’s Gospel provides a counterperspective that seeks to undermine oppressive institutions.