



# Current Trends in Matthean Scholarship

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**I**N A BRIEF ARTICLE SUCH AS THIS IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DO JUSTICE TO THE FLOOD OF publications on Matthew appearing in the past few decades. One must necessarily be selective, with due apologies to those whose work is not mentioned, especially continental scholars whose studies have not been translated.

Before dealing with specific issues I would like to stress how fortunate we are to have three expansive new commentaries on the gospel. The three-volume work in the new International Critical Commentary series, recently completed by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-97) is absolutely first rate in its attention to the scholarly issues raised by each pericope. Ulrich Luz of Bern has also produced a three-volume commentary. The first volume is available in English under the title *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989). The publisher plans to present all three volumes in English in the Hermeneia series. Of these two, Luz's work is perhaps a little more attuned to the needs of the preacher. Its special merit is the extensive attention paid to the history of the interpretation of each passage, that is, the "effect" each has had on the church (*Wirkungs-*

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*Professor Hare presents and analyzes recent contributions to the study of Matthew's Gospel.*

*geschichte*). Also to be highly recommended is the new two-volume commentary in the Word series by Donald A. Hagner (Dallas: Word, 1993-95). One-volume academic commentaries have been published recently by Robert H. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1991), and Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

### I. GRASPING MATTHEW WHOLE

Rudolf Bultmann, an undisputed giant of gospel criticism, was interested primarily in the bits and pieces of the tradition, not in entire gospels. It was not until after the war that this neglect was remedied with the emergence of redaction criticism. Its proponents sought to reconstruct the point of view or theology of each gospel writer by focusing on what each did with his sources. It was generally assumed that Matthew used Mark, the sayings source Q, and other traditions, written or oral, sometimes collectively referred to as M. How Matthew selected, arranged, and altered these sources and traditions provided clues to his understanding of the faith.

This approach was soon challenged by W. R. Farmer, who argued that redaction criticism was based on a faulty solution of the synoptic problem; Matthew, he insisted, was the earliest gospel (*The Synoptic Problem* [New York: Macmillan, 1964]). In the succeeding three decades Farmer and his supporters have tried valiantly, but unsuccessfully, to overthrow the consensus. Despite its weaknesses, the “two document” hypothesis still appears to most scholars to be preferable to Farmer’s alternative.

A different challenge was presented by William G. Thompson, who argued that redaction critics focused too narrowly on Matthew’s alterations of his sources instead of on how the gospel as a whole was put together (*Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Community* [Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970]). This modification, which became known as composition criticism, is now widely accepted.

This led to a revival of interest in the structure of the First Gospel. In 1930 Benjamin Bacon (*Studies in Matthew* [New York: Henry Holt]) proposed that Matthew was to be regarded as a “pentateuch” of five books, each of which concluded with the formula “And it happened when Jesus had finished these sayings” or something similar. Each “sermon” was preceded by a narrative section. To the whole were affixed a preamble (the birth narratives) and an epilogue (the passion and resurrection narratives). This understanding of Matthew has remained very influential, but it has been seriously challenged. Jack Kingsbury (*Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975; 2d ed., 1989]) argues cogently that much more significant for Matthew’s structure than the fivefold formula is one that appears only twice, but at critical points: “From that time on Jesus began...”: 4:17, 16:21. On this basis the gospel is divided by Kingsbury into three parts: “The person of Jesus Messiah,” 1:1-4:16; “The Proclamation of Jesus Messiah,” 4:17-16:20; “The Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Messiah,” 16:21-28:20.

A third group of proposals uses chiasm as the key to the gospel. According to the most prominent of these, the parables discourse of chapter 13 is the center of the gospel. The first discourse, the sermon on the mount (chapters 5-7) is balanced by another long discourse at the end (chapters 23-25). Shorter discourses in chs. 10 and 18 balance each other, and so on (see Peter F. Ellis, *Matthew: His Mind and His Message* [Collegeville: Liturgical, 1974]). To many scholars the chiasmic hypotheses seem too ingenious and tend to cancel each other out.

Although Kingsbury's explicit emphasis on the twofold formula seems overdrawn to many scholars, his general point that Matthew is a *narrative* that proceeds through several stages to its climax in the passion and resurrection is widely preferred to Bacon's stress on the five discourses. A monograph on the issue has recently been published by one of Kingsbury's students, David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988).

## II. NEW APPROACHES BASED ON LITERARY CRITICISM

Jack Kingsbury pioneered the application to Matthew of new developments in secular literary criticism. His approach is also referred to as narrative criticism. In *Matthew As Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986; 2d ed., 1988) he criticizes those who approach Matthew exclusively through historical criticism because they are interested only in matters extrinsic to the gospel, such as the biography of Jesus or the theology of the evangelist. He urges that we leave such concerns behind in order to enter into the world of the gospel's story. "By inhabiting this world one experiences it, and having experienced it, one leaves and returns, perhaps changed, to one's own world" (2).

To enable this experience Kingsbury discusses such literary-critical categories as events, plot, characters, and settings. He attends to the "discourse of the narrative" by distinguishing among "real author," "implied author," and "narrator." He concedes, however, that there is no real need in this instance to differentiate between the "implied author" and the "narrator," since we have a "reliable narrator." The "implied author" of the gospel is "omniscient" and "omnipresent" except in relation to God; he does not pretend to have direct access to heaven and God's thoughts. In contrast to many modern novels, the "narrator" speaks always in the third person, never in the first person. The narrator adopts the "evaluative point of view" of God, expressing this not only by the use of many quotations from the Hebrew scriptures but also by contrasting "thinking the things of God" with "thinking the things of human beings" (16:23). Kingsbury likewise distinguishes "the real reader" and "the implied reader" from "the narratee," although he finds the third category less helpful with respect to Matthew.

A second recent literary-critical approach to Matthew builds on the semiotic theory of the French structuralist A. J. Greimas. Daniel Patte's commentary has the subtitle "A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith" (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). His intention is to uncover the system of Matthew's convictions by paying careful attention to the semantic and narrative oppositions in the various peri-

copes, and thus distinguishing between the convictions that the evangelist assumes his readers will bring to the text and those he wishes to impart.

Other subdisciplines of the newer literary criticism are reader-response criticism and deconstruction. Undoubtedly these approaches are being employed in the study of Matthew, but I must confess that no extended studies of these kinds have yet come to my attention.

### III. SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Other scholars have investigated the secular disciplines of sociology, sociology of language, and social history in the hope of finding new tools for understanding Matthew.

The subtitle of J. Andrew Overman's *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* indicates his focus: "The Social World of the Matthean Community" (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). The gospel, he avers, is best understood when it is treated as a mirror of the competition and conflict between the Christian Jews for whom Matthew writes and formative Judaism, the movement that eventually evolved into rabbinic Judaism.

A similar perspective is espoused by Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994). In this study Saldarini makes explicit use of the sociology of deviance. The Matthean Jews, he argues, have been labeled as deviant by their competitors in formative Judaism, but this has by no means removed them from being accepted as part of the Jewish community, nor do they regard themselves as having left that community. They continue to compete with the Pharisees for converts to their particular version of Judaism.

A helpful collection of essays concerning the sociological approach, edited by David L. Balch, is entitled *Social History of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

### IV. DISPUTED ISSUES IN MATTHEAN STUDIES

Still one of the most contentious issues in the study of Matthew is the one addressed by Overman and Saldarini, namely, the social setting of the Matthean church. Their view that Matthew's group is Torah-observant is strongly supported by a young Jewish scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Social History* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1988). Levine concurs with Overman and Saldarini that the Matthean community is primarily Jewish. Those gentiles who have joined this community have taken on the obligations of Torah; the men have probably been circumcised and are expected to pay the *fiscus Iudaicus*. The great commission (28:18-20), which inaugurates the gentile mission (without terminating the mission to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," 10:5), by no means abrogates Torah observance; "teaching them to observe whatever I commanded you" looks back to 5:17-20. She recognizes, however, that the Matthean community distinguishes itself from other Jewish groups in important ways.

But members of this church would classify themselves as neither “Jew” nor “gentile”; in the new era of the *ekklesia*, the terms are no longer operative....Consequently, the church is neither the new Israel nor the true Israel. The time of Israel, the time when the Jews retain their privileged position in salvation history, ends with the crucifixion and resurrection. (10)

Because the Matthean believers live in proximity to non-Christian Jews, hostility and persecution continue.

The minority view that the First Gospel must have been written by a gentile for a gentile church, in view of its anti-Jewish statements, has not won many supporters, but many scholars seek a middle position between this view and that of Overman, Saldarini, and Levine. Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), following the lead of earlier scholars, proposes that the woes of chapter 23 suggest that “Matthew’s community has recently parted company with Judaism after a period of prolonged hostility,” yet the separation is incomplete in the sense that Jewish hostility and persecution continue to plague the church (158-159).

Nevertheless the community of the First Gospel is committed to the gentile mission, which will irrevocably distinguish it from Judaism. Admitting that the evidence is far from certain, Stanton regards it as unlikely that Matthean Christians strictly observed the sabbath.

Intimately related to this basic question concerning the “Jewishness” of Matthew are two related issues: Matthew’s attitude toward the law, and christology. It is not surprising that monographs and commentaries diverge widely on the first of these matters, since the evangelist is by no means unambiguous. Although it is perfectly clear to Levine, for example, that 5:17-20 requires rigorous observance of Torah, other scholars point out how quickly Matthew compromises this position by rendering the divorce provision of Deuteronomy null and void (5:31-32). Saldarini makes much of the Matthean addition to a Marcan verse at 24:20, “nor on a sabbath,” but, as Stanton points out, this does not demonstrate that Matthew’s readers are strict sabbatarians, since Matthew 12 firmly subordinates the sabbath to human need. Stanton argues that flight on the sabbath is to be avoided if possible because it would prompt Jewish hostility. Because of such ambiguities and inconsistencies in the gospel, the debate concerning the level of Torah-observance expected by Matthew will probably continue unabated.

It is not at all disputed, on the other hand, that christology separates Matthew’s community from the rest of Judaism. Scholars differ, however, concerning the “level” of Matthew’s christology. Does the evangelist present Jesus as a human, divinely empowered Messiah, whom God will one day install as king and judge? Such a view would be regarded as ludicrous by non-Christian Jews, but they would not treat its adherents as apostates. If, on the other hand, Matthew offers a “high” christology, according to which Jesus is a divine being, “a second god,” thus challenging the monotheistic faith of Israel, Matthean Christianity would be regarded by Jews as blasphemous and subversive.

I am not aware of any study of Matthew's christology that argues for the second position. Closest to it is the proposal that Matthew regarded Jesus as the incarnation of divine wisdom (Sophia), as brilliantly argued by M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970), and pursued further by Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1973), Fred W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), and Celia Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), among others. A variation of this view is maintained by James D. G. Dunn, who agrees that for Matthew Jesus is wisdom, but rejects the thesis that the evangelist believed that Jesus was the *incarnation* of Wisdom (*Christology in the Making* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980] 196-206, 257).

Although this view has been widely accepted, there have been many challenges, most notably an article by Marshall D. Johnson, "Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 [1974] 44-64). My brief critique of Suggs's thesis is presented in *The Son of Man Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 137f. Kingsbury, in his extensive treatment of Matthew's christology in *Structure*, found it unnecessary to deal with the wisdom proposal.

Quite apart from the wisdom issue, it is clear that the First Gospel espouses a fairly "high" christology, in view of its acceptance of the worship of Jesus. This neglected factor, examined in more general terms by L. W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), is discussed with respect to Matthew by M. A. Powell, "A Typology of Worship in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 57 (1995) 3-17. One hopes that fuller studies of this significant issue will be forthcoming. ⊕