



# The Gospel of Matthew and the Passion of Jesus: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives

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**W**ITH THE ADVENT OF THE PASSION (26:1-27:61) MATTHEW'S GOSPEL MOUNTS TO its summit. The preceding eschatological discourse (24:1-25:46) ends with another of the evangelist's transition formulas, but this time he notes "when Jesus had finished saying *all* these things" (26:1). All of the great speeches of Jesus scattered through the gospel are now concluded; there remain only the climactic events of the passion and resurrection.

As he has throughout most of the gospel, Matthew follows his primary source Mark closely but does add some significant and characteristic material such as the instruction of the disciples at the moment of Jesus' arrest (26:52-54), the story of Judas's death (27:3-10), the appearance of Pilate's wife (27:19) and the ac-

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*Matthew's passion narrative reaffirms Jesus' identity as the Messiah of God. It reveals the significance of suffering in the evangelist's vision of the church and its mission. It expresses a theology of history, recapitulating the biblical motif of death to life.*

clamation of the crowd during the trial of Jesus (27:24-25), and the cosmic events triggered by the death of Jesus (27:51-13). The Jerusalem setting is the thread that binds the passion story to the preceding scenes in and around the temple (21:1-25:46).

Rather than trace Matthew's gripping passion story in its narrative sequence, I will point to three dominant motifs that weave their way through the various scenes of Matthew's passion story.<sup>1</sup> Each of them are characteristic of Matthew and each have strong theological and pastoral significance.

### I. PASSION CHRISTOLOGY

The attention of the passion story falls mainly on Jesus, who even in the midst of suffering and death remains a figure of majesty and authority. Matthew colors the christology of the passion story with the same strong tones found throughout the gospel. Thus, right from the start the Matthean Jesus prophetically foretells the events of the passion and prepares his disciples for its onslaught (26:1-2). At the passover meal he predicts Judas' betrayal, the denial of Peter, and the flight of the rest of the disciples (26:20-25, 30-35). In the blessing of the bread and the cup the Matthean Jesus interprets his death as expiation "for the forgiveness of sins," echoing the promise of his God-given name "Jesus" (1:21) and affirming that beyond the frontiers of death he would drink the wine of the kingdom anew with his disciples (26:26-29). His prayer in Gethsemane is anguished, but, even more emphatically, it is a prayer of obedience to the Father, fitting perfectly with Matthew's consistent portrayal of Jesus from the moment of the baptism (3:15) and desert test (4:1-11), and reflecting Jesus' own teaching in the sermon on the mount (6:9-10). At the moment of the arrest Jesus is not taken by surprise: he anticipates his betrayal (26:20-25, 45-46) and as Judas plants his treacherous kiss, Jesus already knows his intention (26:50). Jesus refuses to be rescued by violence, again consistent with his teaching in the sermon on the mount (5:38-48), even though, as God's beloved, legions of angels were at his disposal (26:52-54). Jesus' arrest, as well as the entire passion and his whole life, fulfill the scriptures (26:54), as the gospel had noted from the moment of his birth (see 1:22-23 and Matthew's characteristic fulfillment texts throughout the gospel).

In the face of the high priest's question (26:63-64), Jesus affirms—as the gospel earlier already had (see 16:16)—that he is the Christ and the Son of God. But Jesus is also the Son of Man who would ultimately come in triumph at the end of the world (a strong tie to the preceding discourse; see 24:30-31). Though the soldiers and the passersby mock Jesus for his supposed pretensions to kingship (27:27-30), the reader knows that he truly is the royal Son of God. In a final act of mockery found only in Matthew, his tormentors hurl at Jesus the words of Ps 22:8, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to: for he said, I am God's Son" (27:43). Thereby immediately before the moment of Jesus' death, Matthew again

<sup>1</sup>For a full exposition of Matthew's passion narrative, see D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1985). The present essay is adapted from *The Gospel of Matthew*, by Donald Senior. Copyright © 1997 by Abingdon Press. Adapted by permission.

calls the reader's attention to the issue of Jesus' obedient trust in God, even in the face of death. Jesus dies with the words of Psalm 22 on his lips—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—a prayer of anguish and ultimate trust from the obedient Just One at the final moment of his life.

God's vindication of Jesus' trust and obedience is confirmed in the miraculous signs that follow immediately upon Jesus' death (27:51-53).<sup>2</sup> The veil of the temple is torn in half (a confirming sign of the destruction Jesus had predicted in 24:2), and in imagery drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones revived (Ezekiel 37), events of the endtime begin to happen immediately upon Jesus' death as the earth shakes and the holy ones are liberated from their tombs (27:51-53). The centurion's testimony—"Truly this man was God's Son!" (27:54)—dramatically confirms what the reader of the gospel has long known about Jesus' identity (see 14:33; 16:16). Through his death Jesus, God's obedient Son, has liberated those trapped in the darkness of sheol, freeing them from the grip of sin and death and thus fulfilling the promise of his salvific name (see 1:21) and confirming Jesus' own prophecy that his death would bring forgiveness of sin (26:28).

The passion events, therefore, reveal the core of Matthew's christology. Jesus is the obedient Son of God who enjoys extraordinary intimacy with God and is luminous with God's presence even in the face of death. Jesus is the Son of Man who suffers humiliation and death but will ultimately come in triumph through God's victorious grace. Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the longings of Israel and the savior greater than Moses who liberates them from sin and death.

## II. THE CHURCH IN THE CRUCIBLE OF SUFFERING

The alert reader can also detect in the passion story some of Matthew's vision of the church. The passion of Jesus is in many respects an anticipation of the sufferings the community itself would need to endure as it carried out its mission in history.

Matthew's "mixed" portrayal of the disciples as being of "little faith," found in earlier scenes of the gospel (see 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8), is also confirmed in the passion narrative. As the narrative begins the twelve remain the privileged companions of Jesus, celebrating the last passover with him and being the first to share in the meal that promised forgiveness of sins (26:28). At that meal, Jesus also promised that he would drink the fruit of the vine "with you [i.e., the disciples] in my Father's Kingdom" (26:29).

But most of the passion story reveals the weakness and failure of the disciples in the face of suffering and death. Despite Jesus' warnings earlier in the gospel they seem unprepared: they chide the woman who anoints Jesus (26:8); they sleep

<sup>2</sup>The format of Psalm 22 may have had some influence on Matthew's presentation of this scene. This lament psalm begins with the anguish of the psalmist who cries out to God in a moment of torment and seeming abandonment but ends on a note of triumph, as the psalmist experiences God's vindication. That vindication is felt even in sheol and inspires the praise of the nations (see Ps 22:27-31). The movement from anguished trust to overwhelming vindication in the psalm parallels the movement of the crucifixion scene, especially in Matthew's Gospel; see further, D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, 126-150.

in Gethsemane despite Jesus' instruction to stay awake (26:38, 40, 41, 43, 45; see also 25:13); and at the moment of the arrest all of them abandon Jesus and flee (26:56).

In Matthew's account the characters of Judas and Peter illustrate the failure of discipleship in grim detail. Judas stands for utter failure, as Jesus himself predicts (26:20-25). He aligns himself with Jesus' opponents (26:14-16), calls Jesus "rabbi" contrary to Jesus' own instructions (26:25, 49; see 23:8), and betrays his master with a kiss (26:49). Matthew alone follows Judas' story to its tragic conclusion. Stricken by remorse when Jesus is condemned, the betrayer hurls the blood money into the temple sanctuary and then takes his own life (27:3-20).

Peter, too, models failure in the passion story, but his fate is different. Peter insists that he will never desert Jesus, ironically underscoring the enormity of his eventual denial (26:33). Despite his bravado he sleeps in the garden during Jesus' anguished prayer (26:40). Matthew, following the device of Mark, plays out the denial of Peter in slow motion. Unlike the others, Peter does not flee at the moment of the arrest but follows Jesus "at a distance" (26:58). At the very moment Jesus fearlessly confesses his identity before the high priest, Peter swears "with an oath" that he did not even know Jesus—the taking of the oath a Matthean touch coinciding with Jesus' condemnation of oath-taking in the sermon on the mount (26:74; see 5:33-37). Even though his sin is grievous, Peter will be restored to discipleship as his grief upon remembering Jesus' words already signals (26:75). The reader of the gospel recalls Jesus' blessing of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (16:16-19) and the instruction the disciples had received about limitless forgiveness (18:21-35).

Thus the figures of Peter and Judas vividly illustrate for Matthew's community two different responses to failure: one continues to align himself with Jesus' opponents and despairs, the other is stricken with remorse and will be reconciled.

As had been the case throughout the gospel, other seemingly minor characters display the traits of genuine discipleship even when the chosen twelve do not. The insight and devotion of the woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany is one obvious example (26:6-13). Pilate's wife, a character found only in Matthew's account, defends Jesus as a "just" (δίκαιος) man even as the religious leaders seek to have him crucified (27:19).<sup>3</sup> The Roman centurion and the other soldiers who keep watch over the crucified Jesus confess him as "Son of God" (27:54). Joseph of Arimathea, a "rich man" and a "disciple of Jesus," proclaims his continuing loyalty by offering the crucified Jesus the homage of a proper burial in his own new tomb (27:57-61). And while the other disciples have fled, women who had "followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him" remain by the cross (27:55-56). Some of their number, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary," witness his burial (27:61) and will be the first to discover the empty tomb and encounter the risen Jesus (28:1-10), thereby becoming the ones who proclaimed the resurrection to the disciples (28:10-11).

<sup>3</sup>Note that she gains this insight in a "dream," a sign of divine revelation in Matthew; see 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19.

Through his portrayal of the disciples in the passion story, Matthew reaffirms the warnings found in the mission discourse and the apocalyptic discourse about the struggles the community would face as it carried out its mission in history (see especially 10:16-42; 24:9-14). The passion of Jesus was, in effect, a preview of the passion of the community. Through Jesus' instructions and his portrayal of the disciples throughout the gospel Matthew gives special attention to the church—stressing its foundation in the confession of Peter (16:16-19), empowering its members (18:18), and emphasizing the abiding presence of the risen Christ in its midst (18:20; 28:20). But in the passion story Matthew reminds us of another sober dimension of the church's life. If the community of disciples persisted in following Jesus, it would surely endure suffering and persecution. For some disciples who failed to be alert, the crucible of suffering would prove overwhelming; for others, who listened to Jesus' word and abided with him, it would be a threshold to heroic virtue.

### III. A THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

The passion story also illumines what we could call Matthew's "theology of history."<sup>4</sup> From Matthew's perspective, the death and resurrection of Jesus form the decisive turning point in the history of salvation. Several features of Matthew's account illustrate this.

The opposition of the Jewish leaders to Jesus reaches its climax in the passion and serves multiple purposes. The negative portrayal given them throughout the gospel is only intensified in the passion story. They conspire to arrest Jesus by stealth (26:3-5) and pay Judas thirty pieces of silver to betray his master (26:14-16). They engineer his arrest (26:47) and seek "false testimony" against Jesus (26:59). The high priest, in the name of the council, rejects Jesus' testimony about his identity and labels it blasphemy (26:65). The entire council declares that Jesus is worthy of death (26:66; 27:1) and they themselves mock and abuse him (26:67-68). The story of Judas's death becomes an even more insistent indictment of them. While the ill-fated disciple finds remorse that he has betrayed "innocent blood" (27:3-4), the priests and elders rebuff him and take up the blood money themselves—ironically signaling their own complicity. Through the last of the gospel's fulfillment quotations Matthew emphasizes that even this tragic moment falls within God's plan (27:9-10).

Matthew's rendition of the trial before Pilate is calculated to underscore further the leaders' rejection of Jesus. They take the lead in accusing him before the governor (27:12) and despite the attempts of both Pilate and his wife (27:19) to release Jesus, the leaders persuade the crowd to choose Barabbas (27:20-23). As Jesus hangs on the cross, the leaders mock the very affirmations that the gospel has repeatedly directed at Jesus: his role as savior of others; his identity as the Messiah ("the King of Israel") and God's beloved son (27:41-43).

<sup>4</sup>See D. Senior, "The Death of Jesus and the Birth of a New World: Matthew's Theology of History in the Passion Narrative," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (1992) 416-423.

Alone of all the evangelists, Matthew extends the hostility of the leaders beyond the death of Jesus. They insist that a guard be set at the tomb to prevent the disciples from taking away Jesus' body (and then falsely claiming that he was raised from the dead) and then, even in the face of the guards' testimony about the miraculous events at the tomb, bribe the guards to lie (27:62-66; 28:11-15). In one of the clearest signs that Matthew reads the current experience of his community into the events of the gospel, he concludes his account by noting that the false testimony about the resurrection of Jesus continues "among the Jews to this day" (28:15).

On one level this negative portrayal of the leaders serves as a foil to Matthew's portrayal of Jesus. Their ill will and hostility throw into relief the integrity and majestic authority of Jesus as the Messiah and suffering Son of Man. But the comportment of the leaders has a more fundamental significance for Matthew's theology, illustrating the rejection of Jesus and the Christian mission experienced by many of Matthew's Jewish Christians and thereby paradoxically paving the way for the mission to the gentiles.

This turn of events was, in Matthew's perspective, not simply a tragic accident of history but was entwined with God's own mysterious will. Just as the mission of Jesus fulfilled the scriptures so, too, did all of the events of the passion (26:54), even the betrayal of Judas and the complicity of the leaders in the shedding of Jesus' innocent blood (27:9-10). Matthew's story had already hinted at this turning point in history: the coming of the magi to do homage to Jesus while Herod and the leaders responded hostilely (2:1-12); the faith of the centurion in Capernaum leading Jesus to foresee gentiles sitting at Abraham's table while the heirs of the kingdom are banned to the outer darkness (8:11-12); Jesus' acknowledgment of the "great faith" of the Canaanite woman at the border of Tyre and Sidon (15:28); the blunt conclusion to the parable of the vineyard directed at the Pharisees, which predicted that the vineyard would be "taken away from you and given to a people (ἔθνος) that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43); and Jesus' prediction that the temple would be destroyed (24:2).

Now this turning point in history would reach its apex in Jesus' death and resurrection. For Matthew the passion of Jesus was an eschatological event, bringing to an end the old age and ushering in the new. As the passover eve approached, Jesus had referred to the passion as the "kairos," the decisive endtime (26:18).<sup>5</sup> And at the very moment of Jesus' death Matthew fills the scene with portents of the endtime: the sky darkens (27:45), the veil of the temple is torn in two (27:51), the earth quakes, and events expected for the end of the world begin to take place: the opening of the tombs and the resurrection of the just Israelites.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Although the word *kairos* can mean ordinary time, Matthew and other New Testament writers often use this term to refer to the endtime, as in 8:29; 13:30; 16:3; 21:34, 41; 24:45.

<sup>6</sup>Earthquakes, the opening of the graves and other such cosmic portents were some of the typical events associated with the end of the world in Jewish apocalyptic literature: e.g., earthquakes, see Judges 5:4; 2 Sam 22:8; Ps 68:8; 104:32; Joel 4:14-17; splitting of the rocks, 1 Kgs 19:11; Psalm 114:7; also 4 Ezra 9:2-3; 2 Bar 32:1; 1 Enoch 1:3-9. Daniel 12:1-2 and Ezekiel 37:11-14 both mention the opening of the graves and the resurrection of the just.

Thus Matthew portrays the very moment of Jesus' death as a triumph, an anticipation of the resurrection. In the empty tomb story, too, Matthew will include this kind of eschatological coloring: there is a great earthquake and an angel of the Lord clothed in shining white rolls back the stone from the tomb (28:2).

For Matthew's theology, the rejection of Jesus by the leaders and, through their influence, by the people themselves, is only one side of a coin: from rejection comes new life; from the broken hopes experienced in the mission to Israel comes the mission to the gentiles. This is why Matthew describes the decisive choice of the leaders and the people at the Roman trial with such solemnity. Throughout the dialogue with Pilate, Matthew emphasizes the choice that faces the leaders (27:17, 21, 22, 23). While the gentile governor and his wife affirm Jesus' innocence, the leaders sway the crowds to reject Jesus and choose Barabbas. The climax comes in an episode unique to Matthew's account. Evoking an Old Testament ritual (see Deut 12:1-8), Pilate washes his hands and declares his innocence for the shedding of Jesus' blood. In response the "whole people" (πᾶς ὁ λαός), invoking another biblical formula, accept responsibility, declaring "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:24-25).

Few New Testament texts have had a more controversial history than these words of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>7</sup> Their meaning within the narrative world of Matthew's Gospel should be fairly clear to readers who have worked their way from the beginning of the story to this point. For most of the gospel the crowds were neutral and often positive in their responses to Jesus. But the leaders were consistently hostile and now that hostility engulfs the entire people as the leaders persuade them to reject Jesus. Matthew had already warned about the corrosive influence of the leaders in the indictments of chapter 23 (23:13-14) and now it comes true. Thus Matthew is much harder on the leaders than he is on the people, blaming them for Jesus' rejection. The evangelist believed that the terrible events of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple were punishment for this sin (see, for example, 22:7). Therefore, the people who rejected Jesus "and their children" (that is, the generation that experienced the fall of Jerusalem) experienced retribution for shedding the innocent blood of Jesus.

As difficult as this theology of Matthew may be for contemporary interpretation, it is a far cry from the devastating interpretation often given to 27:24-25 as a blank check for anti-semitism, understanding the cry of the people as a perpetual curse on the Jewish people of all generations. Such was not Matthew's perspective. For him the rejection of Jesus by Israel was one unfathomable component of the mysterious providence of God (and so, too, was the paradoxical fact that through the shed blood of Jesus God would forgive sins, 26:28). Although he believed that it involved human responsibility—for the leaders first of all and to some extent for those generations of Jews in Jesus' day and in the period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem—Matthew's greatest interest was in interpreting what for him

<sup>7</sup>See the thorough discussion in R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 830-839.

and many in his community was a tragic and inexplicable turn in history. Instead of acclaiming allegiance to the one Matthew's community considered the Messiah, many in Israel had rejected him; instead of a successful mission to Israel, Matthew's community met opposition, particularly from the leaders; instead of a successful completion of God's age-long mission to Israel, gentiles, not Jews, were streaming into the community and defining its future.

We can imagine that for Matthew, himself a devout Jew and believer in Jesus, and for Matthew's Jewish Christian community who undoubtedly considered themselves still part of Israel and faithful to its heritage, this turn of events must have been profoundly unsettling. Matthew's goal was to find the guiding hand of God's providence within these tortuous and unexpected twists of history. His search was for continuity in the midst of unanticipated discontinuity. For him and his community, the death and resurrection of Jesus was the key: from death came new life. At the defining moment of Jesus' death and vindication, an old era of history was completed and the new and final age begun. The pattern of life from death and of continuity in the midst of discontinuity were not new but represented biblical convictions as fundamental as God's liberating Israel from Egypt and the creation of a new people in the wake of the exile. The church's future, as well as the fate of Israel, was in the hands of God who remained the Lord of history.

Each of these motifs—the identity of Jesus transparent in the midst of suffering; a vision of the church that has room for both heroic virtue and the weak in need of reconciliation; a theology of history that finds strength and hope in the midst of discontinuity—are messages the church can take to heart on the threshold of the new millennium. ⊕