



Connecting the Dots and Filling the Gaps: Imagining God with Us

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Climate researchers and social scientists often note with alarm that as the evidence for climate change has grown stronger and more compelling, fewer Americans believe that it is real. This is due in part to clever media campaigns meant to cast doubt on the science. But it may have even more to do with the way humans process difficult, threatening information. Many books and articles on climate change assail readers with painful facts and consequences, all meant to motivate us to change. But it turns out that simply confronting people with facts does not produce the effects we think it should. Many Germans who lived in proximity to Nazi death camps, including some who toured the camps after the war ended, nonetheless refused to believe that the Holocaust had taken place. Some even hardened their resistance to the idea that something so terrible could have happened. The problem was not access to the facts, but that in the face of a terrible reality we are more likely to prefer the comforts of delusion and denial.¹ Apparently, changing our minds requires not just new information—not even lots of it—but the capacity to frame that information in meaningful and constructive ways. The keys to this reframing are imagination and narrative. Change, it turns out, requires new

¹See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2001).

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stories, new ways of imagining the world and our place in it, and then new ways of acting.

IMAGINATION AND NARRATIVE

Many people classify imagination as an internal mental process at least one step removed from daily reality. Imagination is for children and dreamers, something to be schooled out of us as we move toward responsible adulthood. Recent research, however, affirms that imagination is a constant and necessary process in human cognition and meaning-making. Imagination is not the occasional day-dream or a “made-up” version of reality, but the necessary means by which we “fill in the gaps” or “connect the dots” between the partial, jumbled, often conflicting perceptions that come to us through our senses.² These perceptions are filtered and ordered by the social and cultural frames we employ to make sense of the world and our place within it, frames that are themselves imaginative constructs. Imagination is also essential as we fill the gaps and connect the dots in the passage of time, navigating the constant flux between memory, current experience, and expectation or hope.³ Memory and hope—two of the factors that make us human—are impossible without the daily, nonstop processes of imagination, processes so constant in our lives that most of the time we are scarcely aware of them. Without imagination helping us to categorize and make meaning of our disparate perceptions, experiences, and social frameworks, we become less than human. Imagination is, thus, not the absence of rationality, as many presume, but rather the key to human cognition and critical awareness.

The most powerful tool by which the imagination connects the dots and fills in the gaps is narrative.⁴ Narratives—especially the stories we live by—are both products of the imagination and the primary means by which we ground and train the imagination. Stories provide the words and images—the lenses—through which we perceive and make sense of the world. They train us to see or sense certain things and ignore or discount others. Via the memories they hold and the dreams they shape, stories serve as both anchor and transport for the imagination.⁵ Religions that thrive and endure across time and disparate cultures must have strong, integral, and relevant narratives that help people make sense of their lives and engage the most important questions of the human condition in meaningful ways. Religion itself is a way of connecting the dots: “re-ligio” means to reconnect and bind together what is otherwise fragmented or disjointed.

²Etienne Pelaprat and Michael Cole, “Minding the Gap’: Imagination, Creativity and Human Cognition,” *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 45/4 (2011) 397–418.

³I prefer terms like memory, current experience, and expectation or hope to our more abstract notions of past, present, and future.

⁴The stories we hear in oral performances may be the most important for shaping imagination, for it is in processing what we hear that the most gaps are to be found and, thus, that the imagination must be most actively engaged, thereby generating both strong memory and hope.

⁵Molly Andrews, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 2.

Although social scientists persistently remind us that the conventions of social life are merely human constructions, the regularity and “common sense” appearance of many assumptions and patterns of social behavior make them seem more like immutable laws than “social conventions.” In North American culture we take for granted, for example, that social hierarchies and the strategic use of force and violence are necessary for the preservation of order. We presume that the purchase and consumption of a wide variety of the latest and best products is a reliable means to ensure our happiness and well-being, even when experience persistently proves otherwise. In the religious sphere, many of us imagine that God is a transcendent, all-powerful, but mostly distant or absent figure, who will someday either judge us or, we hope, welcome us into the heavenly realm, where we will live forever as spiritual beings, no longer beset by the woes of this world. (The popular notion of salvation seems mostly to be a story of escape.) The Bible, however, confirms none of these narratives and social scripts.

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MATTHEW'S PROJECT TO RESHAPE OUR IMAGINATION OF THE WORLD

Moving people from the foundational narratives, values, and ways of seeing imposed upon them by their cultures is a massive, nearly impossible undertaking, but that is just what the evangelists set out to do. Matthew's Gospel challenges modern narratives as surely as it did ancient scripts. In Matthew's world, God is not absent, but present with us, “Emmanuel” (“God with us,” 1:23; 28:20). In Matthew's story, Jesus and his disciples can walk on water, raise the dead, and feed thousands of people with a few fish and loaves of bread, but they are not good consumers. In Matthew's story, the real source of salvation and well-being is not the empire of Rome or any other human force. In fact, God's power in Matthew is fundamentally different from human political and military power, both in its exercise and its outcomes in the lives of people. God's power heals, reconciles, and gathers diverse people together as one family, rather than building walls that keep them apart. Finally, in Matthew's vision of salvation, God is not coming someday to rescue us from this earth and remove us to heaven, but is actively working through Jesus and his followers to reconcile and restore the whole of heaven and earth and to realize at last the biblical vision in which God, humankind, and the whole of creation rest together in peace, as envisioned in the original Sabbath (Gen 2:1–3; cf. Matt 11:25—12:14). This is such a strange story to our ears that we are often

tempted to domesticate or repackage it, using only the pieces that better fit our dominant narratives.

In order to inculcate this distinctive story into the imagination and practices of those who hear the Gospel, Matthew must invite—perhaps even compel—those hearers to become active, critical interpreters,⁶ not only of the stories mediated to them by their society but even of the story Matthew is telling. Using Matthew's terms, they must become people who “see” and “hear,” and then “understand” (Matt 13:13–17). Accomplishing this task depends first on unveiling the truth about existing social systems, disabusing people of their guiding assumptions and narratives. In Jesus' and Matthew's day, the dominant narratives were shaped by Rome and, for Jewish people, by the temple leaders in Jerusalem. Rome represented itself as a divinely ordered, universal, and everlasting reign, the fulfillment of ancient oracles, the source and guarantor of salvation, justice, and peace. Even more clearly than the other Gospels, Matthew unveils the duplicity and inevitable violence that props up both Roman rule and the temple cultus (for example, 2:1–18; 14:1–12; 21:12–17). The second crucial element in Matthew's project is to offer a compelling alternative narrative, which Matthew accomplishes by weaving the story of Jesus' ministry, fate, and conquest of death into the strands of Israel's stories and hopes. Jesus' temptations (4:1–11), for example, revisit the stories of Israel's temptations as they wandered in the wilderness. Jesus' ministry is cast in terms that remind readers especially of the covenant God made with Abraham, of Moses and of Israel's liberation from slavery, and of the promise of David's kingdom.

TRAINING ACTIVE INTERPRETERS

It is not enough, however, merely to replace one script with another if people remain passive consumers of whatever story seems most appealing at the moment or is forced upon them by dominant media interests. Matthew apparently understands that the nurture of faithful disciples depends not just on having a better, more ancient, and more truthful story to tell, but on transforming the way would-be disciples engage the narratives they hear. Only by becoming—and remaining—active, critical interpreters (no longer the “blind”) can Matthew's audience “see” and “hear” clearly, “understand” in the depths of their minds and hearts, and continue to reshape their perceptions and practices around the story of the crucified, risen, living, and now present Christ. So a third crucial aspect of generating a fresh narrative imagination entails training would-be disciples to pay attention (13:10–17), to become “watchers” (24:42; 25:13; cf. 26:38, 40–41), that is, critical interpreters of their world and God's work in it. In what follows we will fo-

⁶See Michael Warren's discussion of “cultural agency” in *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (London: Trinity Press International, 1997). Warren notes that most modern media is “passive, mesmeric, and indiscriminating” and thus not conducive to the cultivation of such critical faculties as “logic and imagination, linguistic precision, historical awareness,” or the capacity for long, intense, and focused attention (p. 16, citing Mark Miller).

cus on the ways Matthew trains us to look beneath the surface, to resist taking things at face value, to delight in (well, at least live with) ambivalence and complexity, and to discern God's presence in the least expected places (for example, 25:31–46). From the outset Matthew presents the hearers of this Gospel with riddles and puzzles, citations of ambiguous prophecies, ironies and double entendres that persistently resist resolution and thereby stretch our imaginations. Matthew even challenges the audiences' most basic cosmological assumptions. Rather than seeing "heaven" and "earth" as fixed, bounded, and exclusive domains, Matthew's Jesus and sometimes even his disciples cross and blur the boundaries between heaven and earth (9:1–8; 14:22–33).

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HOW MATTHEW'S GENEALOGY TRAINS CRITICAL READERS

The genealogy that begins the Gospel illustrates Matthew's tactics well. On the one hand, the repetitive list of names, so foreign and obscure to modern readers, may be an impediment to reading any further. For early Christian audiences, however, this material was crucial for establishing Jesus' lineage and identifying his place within Israel's story. The first line of the Gospel announces that Jesus is the Christ, son of David (the rightful heir to the throne of Israel and, in Matthew, a healer), and son of Abraham (fulfilling the demands and promises of the covenant upon which Israel was founded). The first two Greek words of this opening sentence—"book/record [of the] genealogy/generation/genesis"—establish the multivalent character of Matthew's Gospel. On the one hand, "record of the genealogy" is a straightforward description of the list of names that follows. The prominent inclusion of a genealogy would have helped frame the whole Gospel as either a Jewish history book, like Deuteronomy or 1–2 Chronicles, or a Hellenistic-style biography of a great philosopher or leader; both genres typically featured genealogies. Perhaps Matthew means us to hear the Gospel both ways, so that we perceive Jesus as a great teacher whose birth, life, fate, and teachings comprise a unified, integral whole (like a Hellenistic biography) and as the focal figure in events that change the course of history and lead to the formation of a people (like the Jewish histories). The word "genesis," "genealogy," or "generation" (1:1; cf. also 1:17, 18) also links the story of Jesus to the accounts of the creation, disordering, and new creation recorded in Gen 1–11 (see Gen 1:1; 2:4; 4:17–26; 5:1–32; 6:9–10; 10:1–32; 11:10–32). Matthew presents Jesus as the continuation and fulfillment of God's intentions for creation itself. In short, even the first sentence of this book, so simple and direct, presents astute audiences with a range

of important interpretive alternatives. We are being invited to be readers who pay attention.

The same quality characterizes the genealogy itself. On the one hand, the genealogy establishes Jesus' relationship with beloved, pivotal figures in Israel's history, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Boaz, David, and Solomon. But the list also includes less savory characters, such as Joram, Ahaz, and Manasseh—some of Judah's more wicked kings—and many names about which we know very little. At least two other features of these lists beg for our attention. First is the well-known and much discussed inclusion of four women's names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (identified, tellingly, as "the wife of Uriah"). In each case, they are outsiders (non-Israelites) and elements of their stories suggest some form of sexual impropriety. And in each case they help to turn the story of God's people in the direction God intends. When the genealogy is read aloud, their names break the rhythmic pattern of the generations, thus calling particular attention to their roles in the larger story. Does their intrusive presence suggest the importance of Gentiles or the marginal in Jesus' story? Are they meant to remind us that Jesus' ancestry is riddled with problems and obstacles that must be overcome, sometimes by artifice and cunning? Are they getting us ready for the introduction of the inevitable questions about the propriety of Jesus' own birth? So, while the genealogy supplies important information about Jesus, it also raises questions and generates puzzles.

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A second feature of the genealogy that calls for attention is Matthew's partitioning of the list into three segments of fourteen generations each. Especially in the first third, the genealogy largely follows what is found in 1 Chron 1–3, but omits many names from these lists in order to arrive at fourteen generations in the second and third segments. The most intriguing aspect of the "3 x 14" scheme is that the last segment is defective. Matthew's insistence that each of the three epochs contains fourteen generations (1:17) is an engraved invitation to go back and count. Counting from Salathiel, the first member of third segment, however, Jesus represents the thirteenth generation. Did Matthew fail arithmetic? Is the missing generation an oversight or intentional? Are we to count Jesus twice, as both Jesus and Christ? Are we to count God or the Holy Spirit (1:18) as the missing generation? Again, Matthew has set in place a puzzle that resists clear resolution, requiring us to become active interpreters who will use the stories that follow to fill in the gaps and connect the dots.

COMIC SCENES AND AMBIVALENT PROPHECIES IN THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Among many other examples of Matthew's invitation to become active interpreters is the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Only in Matthew does Jesus triumphantly ride not one, but two animals, a donkey and a colt, a scenario that, despite its comic logistics, Matthew emphasizes (21:2, 5, 7). Perhaps, as some have argued, Matthew is demonstrating a clumsy, woodenly literal understanding of the Hebrew parallelism of Zech 9:9. Or is Matthew underlining the fact that Jesus is at once both the royal Son of David and one counted among the meek and humble? Like most of Matthew's "fulfillment quotations,"⁷ which are usually taken to be simple, straightforward assertions of the linkage between Jesus and Old Testament prophecy, Matthew's use of Zech 9:9 is both richer and more ambivalent than first meets the eye. Matthew typically draws the fulfillment citations from ambiguous oracles that are open to more than one interpretation—prophecies that speak, for example, of both judgment and deliverance. The citation in 21:5 conveys not only christological content, but a sense that Jesus the Messiah comes both to restore Israel and judge her enemies, as well as to bring peace to the nations.⁸

THE MANY FACES OF THE PARABLES

Perhaps the best illustration of the way Matthew trains active interpreters is the Janus-like character of this Gospel's parables. Janus was the Roman god of gates, doorways, endings and beginnings, usually depicted with two or sometimes even four faces. Matthew's parables typically have more than one face; they open doors for some while shutting others out (or perhaps they are revolving doors). In any case, they do just what Matthew's Jesus says they do: they reveal "what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (13:35) at the same time they make certain that, as Jesus says, his audience "might hear but never understand" (13:13; cf. Isa 6:9–10). Because parable is an "apocalyptic" form of speech that simultaneously conceals and reveals, it is inevitably ambivalent. Readers usually try, however, to identify a single or primary meaning in Jesus' parables, whether by the use of imaginative allegory or by reduction to a single, moral point. But Matthew's parables seem especially resistant to this kind of reduction. They are deliberately ambivalent, intentionally susceptible to disparate, even diametrically opposed effects.

Most often, Matthew's Jesus tells parables that from one perspective signal judgment, and from another salvation. Is the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1–9)—a parable about parables—an illustration of judgment (lots of seeds fall on the path or the rocks or are choked by weeds) or of abundance and salvation? Does the parable offer warning or reassurance or both? It seems to depend on where one stands in relation to Jesus and the empire of heaven he represents. To take another

⁷See Matt 1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; and 12:18–21, among others.

⁸Stanley P. Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 208.

example, is the parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32) about something hidden and tiny but nonetheless powerful, or about an invasive weed that threatens more important crops, as most Galileans would have perceived it? Is the kingdom of heaven small but powerful, or invasive and threatening, or both? Does mustard really grow up to be as big as the cedars of Lebanon, which became symbols of imperial hubris and ecological destruction? Matthew’s description of the mustard “trees” here echoes the visions of hope and judgment in Ezek 21:22–24; 31:13, and Dan 4:12–14. Does the parable announce the doom of human empires or the surprising, hidden power of the empire of heaven, or both?

One of the most important and troubling stories for students of Matthew’s Gospel is the parable of the wicked tenants in 21:33–46. Many modern interpreters read this story as an allegorical expression of Matthew’s understanding of salvation history, focusing especially on the displacement of Israel by the (Gentile) church (see 21:43). When the parable is allegorized, as the church traditionally has done, it seems to signal the end at least of the leaders’ reign over Israel (for which the “vineyard” was a traditional symbol), if not all of Israel, as many interpreters argue. In this case, the story is not just a prophetic critique of Israel’s leadership, but announces a decisive shift in covenant faithfulness and salvation history. The theological implications of this reading are profound: Has the God who offers and expects unlimited forgiveness (see 18:21–35) run out of patience with Israel, the covenant people? But this parable, too, presents more than one face, making it a riddle for Matthew’s audience, no less than for the chief priests and elders in the story.

Matthew thus invites us to grapple especially with the question of who God is and whether and how God fulfills the covenant with Israel. The questions the story raises—more than the apparent answers—make this a signature story for Matthew, posing one of the defining interpretive riddles of the Gospel.

After recounting the story of an absentee landlord whose tenant farmers turn violent, Jesus turns to the chief priests and elders and Pharisees (21:23, 45) to ask what the landowner will do with such evil tenant farmers. Without hesitation they affirm that he will “put those wretches to a miserable death” and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce when the harvest comes (21:41). Jesus replies that the empire of God will be taken from “you” and given to a “people” (or “nations” or “Gentiles”) who will produce the fruits of the kingdom (21:43). Because the chief priest and elders were themselves wealthy landowners, their self-identification with the landowner was easy. They would regard the tenants’ behavior as an attack upon their authority, their families, and their property. They readily slip the noose Jesus gives them around the tenants’ necks, only to discover it drawing tight around their own (21:45).

But is it really the case that what Israel's leaders would do to such tenants is also what God will do to all of Israel? Or does their statement only set the standard by which they will be judged (cf. 7:2)? Does Matthew invite the audience to hear the story as an allegory for the replacement of Israel by the church? Or is it a warning to all who call on God's name to produce the fruit of eschatological harvest: mercy, forgiveness, gathering, restoration, and healing? Matthew thus invites us to grapple especially with the question of who God is and whether and how God fulfills the covenant with Israel. The questions the story raises—more than the apparent answers—make this a signature story for Matthew, posing one of the defining interpretive riddles of the Gospel. Again, Matthew does not resolve the puzzle for the audience, but leaves to those who hear the Gospel to discover its resolution in their life together.

CREATING GAPS AND COMPELLING DISCIPLES TO CONNECT THE DOTS

These examples illustrate just a few of the ways Matthew's Gospel remaps reality, but also the ways Matthew creates gaps, tensions, and riddles for the community of disciples to resolve. Matthew understands that the map must be local, a cooperative product of both the evangelist and the local community of disciples who engage these stories within their life together. Matthew is a guide to where and how to discern the power and presence of the living Christ in the world, but Matthew also knows that each community, each disciple, must read the map carefully *in situ*, connecting the dots and filling in the gaps for themselves. Only by becoming active, critically engaged readers and interpreters of their world in light of the gospel can the narrative become their story as well as Matthew's. It is in the struggle to fill the gaps and connect the dots in our social imagination that we become the kind of community that is attuned to watch for and bear witness to "God with us," attuning our senses and joining our lives to Christ in the realization of the empire of heaven on earth. ⊕

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