



EXPOSITORY

Commentary

Matthew - Luke

ESV Expository Commentary

VOL. VIII

Matthew–Luke



EXPOSITORY

Commentary

VOL. VIII

—
Matthew—Luke

Matthew
Daniel M. Doriani

Mark
Hans F. Bayer

Luke
Thomas R. Schreiner

CONTENTS

Tables	7
Figures	9
Preface to the ESV Expository Commentary	11
Contributors	13
Abbreviations	15
Matthew 21 <i>Daniel M. Doriani</i>	Luke 703 <i>Thomas R. Schreiner</i>
Mark 451 <i>Hans F. Bayer</i>	
Scripture Index	1107

MATTHEW

Daniel M. Doriani

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW

Author

The Gospel of Matthew is technically anonymous, since it lacks the kind of self-identification evident in the epistles of Paul or Peter. Yet every Greek manuscript of Matthew bears the heading *KATA MATTHAION*—“according to Matthew.” So the book is effectively entitled “The Gospel according to Matthew” in all extant copies. Further, the church fathers living closest to the apostolic age unanimously ascribe it to Matthew the apostle. There is no compelling reason to doubt this consensus.

Date

The dates offered for Matthew’s composition vary widely, from roughly AD 45 to 90.¹ Skeptics generally place Matthew after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 because they doubt the possibility of predictive prophecy, although some critics grant that Jesus may have had sufficient insight to foresee Israel’s future apart from revelation. Conservatives normally assert that Matthew predates 70, a claim that would support the argument that Matthew the tax collector wrote the first Gospel. Being written prior to 70 would also give the manuscript time to work through the empire and reach early Christian writers who cite it. Scholars also notice that the language used to describe the fall of Jerusalem appears to derive not from eyewitness but from common OT language for God’s acts of judgment and from Greco-Roman language for calamities. Finally, the language of certain passages seems to imply that the temple still stood when Matthew wrote (5:23–24; 12:6; 23:16–22; 26:61) But the dating of Matthew matters less than its authorship by a man who was an ear- and eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry.²

Matthew and the Other Synoptic Gospels

Skeptics will counter that it is strange that an apostle would borrow so heavily from another Gospel, that of Mark. But the priority of Mark has not been and probably cannot be established. Only a few things are certain. First, the Gospel writers appear to share a few main sources. Second, the order of events in Matthew

¹ On the earliest date cf. John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

² Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988).

and Mark are very similar, and the content of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are close when all three are recounting the same episode or instruction. Third, the wording of teachings unique to Matthew and Luke is often very similar. This suggests either that they shared a source or that one had access to the other's work.

Occasion and Audience

Scholars commonly propose that Matthew was written at Syrian Antioch for Christians living there. The earliest convincing citation of Matthew is by Ignatius of Antioch (d. AD 108). More importantly, Matthew is written for readers who have both Jewish sensibilities and interest in the Gentile mission. Syrian Antioch fits this perfectly, since the city had a sizable Jewish population and commissioned the first missionaries to Gentiles (Acts 13:1–3). But certainty is impossible, since cities such as Maritime Caesarea and Alexandria probably fit the same criteria.

Canonicity

Like the other Gospels, Matthew was received at once and everywhere as an authoritative account of Jesus' life. The church already knew the outline and content of Jesus' life and had immense respect for Jesus' words. They recognized Matthew as an accurate, God-given record of Jesus' life.

Reliability

The chief concern of this commentary is exposition of Matthew's text, yet Matthew, like the entire NT, always assumes and sometimes asserts that the events described did indeed take place. Further, the accounts seem to describe events and their meaning accurately. The body of the commentary takes up historicity occasionally, but a few global remarks may help.³ Above all, if the apostle Matthew was indeed the author of the first Gospel, there are grounds to believe it is a trustworthy account.

First, there are good reasons to trust his record of Jesus' words. Memorization was essential to ancient education, and people sought to develop that skill (students took notes, too). In rabbinic schools, teachers repeated their principal teachings until students had memorized and mastered them. Jesus' teaching also lent itself to memorization. Its poetic elements include parallelism and rhythm. It also includes pithy proverbs, graphic word pictures and stories (parables), wordplay, and overstatement. These graphic and poetic elements make Jesus' words easy to recall. When Jesus states, "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14), it passes readily into memory's hoard. Further, as the disciples itinerated with Jesus, they heard his teaching repeatedly. Finally, early Christians desired to preserve the words of Jesus. We see this from the way in which the words of Jesus in the Synoptics are nearly identical.

³ Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 121–129, 182–191; E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays*, WUNT 18 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 242–247.

Second, the culture of Matthew's day had recognized standards for historiography. This included the right to select highlights or to epitomize a speech, but not the right to alter its substance. The early church knew that people fabricated stories of Jesus and the apostles, and the church dealt with this strictly when it occurred, even if the intent was to edify. For example, Tertullian wrote a treatise titled "On Baptism" that addressed the question of whether a woman could baptize a child in an emergency, such as impending death. Tertullian knew that some believers would cite for the affirmative the *Acts of Paul*, an orthodox and edifying story. In it a fictitious "woman of pertness" named Thecla begins to teach and lead. Tertullian's comment shows he had no tolerance for fiction presented as fact, even if it advanced orthodoxy:

If the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching and baptizing, let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting Paul's fame from his own store, after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office.⁴

Additional factors make it likely that the apostles would accurately remember events from Jesus' life. Consider how memorable events emblazon themselves on the minds of witnesses for life. I was (erroneously) taken into police custody as a college freshman for murdering a police officer. My brother was with me (although not as a suspect), and we effortlessly remember scores of details from the event: the massive arresting officer, his unholstered gun, his first words, and more. We could not forget the story if we tried, even though it had no enduring significance.

Think then, of the disciples, who saw Jesus reach out, touch, and heal a leper; who saw him calm a storm by a word of command and multiply bits of fish and bread until thousands gorged themselves and bushels of food remained. These events inscribed themselves on the memory. Further, if any faltered in the details, the disciples would have often recounted Jesus' history in each other's presence, especially in Jerusalem, and could have easily corrected each other. Beyond that, living witnesses would have prevented the spread of error. Imagine a spurious story recounted in Matthew reaching a town where it allegedly occurred. Matthew's Gospel would have been immediately discredited if the story of the centurion (8:5–13) or of the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28–34) reached Capernaum or Gadara and everyone said, "We remember no centurion, no demoniacs." Every time a Gospel cites a name or place, it invites verification or falsification. If a story were fabricated, the whole Gospel would be discredited. But there are no records of towns or regions rejecting Matthew or another Gospel. Again, the leadership in Jerusalem could adjudicate any dispute about what Jesus said or did. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, leaders controlled the telling of stories that bore foundational significance for society.⁵

⁴ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. S. Thelwall, ANF (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 3:677.

⁵ Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *AJT* 5/1 (1991): 34–54.

Finally, the apostles sealed their testimony with their lives. People will die for a lie, if duped. Some even die for what they know to be a lie (think of communism) if it promises them wealth or power. But people do not die for a lie they invented if that lie brings them no benefit but instead brings suffering and loss. The apostles died for the testimony to Jesus, and this shows that they believed their report to be true.

With some assurance of the accuracy of Matthew, we now turn to its content, beginning with an overview of the whole.

*A Narrative Outline of Matthew*⁶

Chapter 1 recounts the origin, birth, and identity of Jesus, the Christ, moving from his genealogy (1:1–17) to his birth (1:18–25). The magi, a Gentile group, come to adore Jesus (2:1–12), while Israel's king, Herod, tries to kill him (2:13–23).

John the Baptist heralds the arrival of the kingdom and calls Israel to repent in preparation for God's new work (3:1–12). Surprisingly, Jesus participates in this baptism (3:13–17). Empowered and led by the Spirit, Jesus resists the temptations of the Evil One (4:1–11), then launches his public ministry in Galilee. His miracles attract crowds, from which Jesus selects disciples (4:12–25).

Matthew contains five great discourses, found in chapters 5–7; 10; 13; 18; and 24–25. Like songs in the best musicals, these discourses propel the narrative forward by arriving at the perfect moment. The first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, trains the early disciples, although the crowds listen in (5:1–2; 7:28–29). The sermon opens by describing the blessed character of a disciple (5:1–12), then names the world's reaction to disciples, ranging from persecution to praising God for their light (5:13–16). Jesus instructs his disciples in the right use of God's law, which he affirms and deepens in a series of lessons covering anger, adultery, divorce, truth telling, nonretaliation, love of enemies, and, ultimately, God-like perfection (5:17–48).

Jesus warns that religious practices—alms, prayer, fasting—are dangerous if performed to impress men (6:1–18). True religion serves God rather than money, demonstrating trust in him through freedom from worry or materialistic pursuits (6:19–34). Further, genuine disciples do not use Jesus' teaching to judge others. Instead, seeing the depths of Jesus' commands, they ask for aid (7:1–12). Jesus closes by summoning his disciples to choose the right path, to become fruitful trees, and to build on the right foundation (7:13–29).

As the first ministry of the word ends, the ministry of deeds begins, with works often performed by a word (8:3, 8, 16). Jesus begins with two surprising miracles, benefiting a leper and a Roman occupier (8:1–13). Miracles attract potential followers, who cannot fathom the cost of full discipleship (8:18–22). The next miracles show Jesus' power over nature: the sea (8:23–27), demons (8:28–34), and disease somehow connected to sin (9:1–8). This leads Jesus to call sinners to himself

⁶ This outline occasionally skips a few verses that function as asides within Matthew.

(9:9–13). Additional miracles demonstrate Jesus' authority over all disease, even death (9:18–34).

Once the disciples have seen Jesus' pattern for ministry, he calls twelve as apostles and commissions them to meet Israel's needs (9:35–10:4). This opens the second block of teaching, regarding mission. Jesus charges his disciples to follow the pattern they have just witnessed (10:5–15), to be fearless yet wise in the face of inevitable opposition (10:16–39), and to anticipate rewards for their role in the Master's work (10:40–11:1).

The opposition foretold in chapter 10 flowers in chapters 11–12. Ominously, even John the Baptist doubts Jesus, but Jesus tenderly assures and commends him (11:1–19). Next, Jesus warns the impenitent of Israel while assuring those who seek to rest in him (11:20–30). Conflicts over the Sabbath soon heighten tensions with Israel's leaders (12:1–14). Jesus is the servant of God (12:15–21), but Israel's leaders are blind. By now, even his healings rouse hatred (12:22–37). Nothing counts as evidence for his foes, and so Jesus will offer them nothing more (12:38–45).

This opposition leads Jesus to his third discourse. In a series of eight parables, Jesus declares that his kingdom is present, opposition notwithstanding. Even if it be small and harried, its surpassing value and final size signal its supreme worth (13:1–52).

Events validate Jesus' comments on opposition and slow growth when John is slain (14:1–12) and crowds witness a miracle but think nothing of it (14:13–21). At least the disciples are impressed by Jesus' power when he calms a second storm (14:22–33). Still, when Jesus enters into controversy with Jewish leaders about rituals, the disciples hardly understand him. If anyone appreciates him, it is a Canaanite from Tyre (15:1–28).

After a string of miracles, the Pharisees and Sadducees, almost incredibly, ask Jesus for a sign (16:1–4). This leads to a series of events in which the disciples vacillate (16:5–12), then confess Christ (16:13–20), then falter, demonstrating that they do not understand Jesus after all (16:21–28). Still, additional revelation, especially in the transfiguration, may foster growth (17:1–27).

A fourth block of teaching constitutes chapter 18. As before, the teaching answers a pressing need, for the disciples must learn how to live in community. This includes caring for little ones, seeking the lost, addressing problems when brother sins against brother, and forgiving freely all who repent (18:1–35). Questions of greatness, moral standards, and achievement continue into chapters 19–20. Over several conversations, Jesus tells disciples neither to aim low for minimal decency (19:1–12) nor to aim high in overweening pride (19:16–26). He also warns that "doing great things for God" can lead them to think more of God's rewards than of his grace (19:27–20:16). Above all, Jesus models the greatness that comes from loving sacrifice. It is the path to glory both for Jesus and for them (20:17–28).

Next, Jesus enters Jerusalem and symbolically judges it, especially in the temple (20:29–21:22). This launches additional conflict with leaders who question

Jesus and attempt to trap him. In response, he tells stories that castigate them (20:23–22:46). The verbal sparring ends when Jesus warns his disciples to beware of scribes and Pharisees. His denunciation of their hypocrisy is sharp yet poignant, for he still longs to gather Israel to himself (23:1–36).

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (23:37–39) leads logically to his fifth discourse, addressing eschatology. Although the disciples want to know when judgment will come, Jesus instructs them to stay ready for Jesus *whenever* he comes (24:1–51). They must watch, for they will long wait for Jesus. Meanwhile, they must use their talents to good effect until Jesus does indeed come (25:1–30). Then all flesh will stand before him and hear his final word, either “Come” to me or “Depart from me” (25:31–46).

Next, Jesus warns the disciples of his impending crucifixion once more (26:1–2). Soon the chief priests plot Jesus' death, which Judas facilitates, even as a juxtaposed scene shows how Jesus' followers love him (26:3–16). After arranging his final Passover meal, the first Lord's Supper, with his disciples, Jesus withdraws to pray (26:17–46). There Judas betrays him, soldiers arrest him, and his disciples abandon him (26:47–56). Within hours, the authorities try, condemn, abuse, and crucify Jesus. He continues his ministry from the cross until he chooses to relinquish his spirit (26:57–27:50). Almost cinematically, Matthew intercuts scenes of human failure with scenes of Jesus' heroic endurance. He is faithful to the end, even as Peter denies Jesus, Judas betrays him (and then kills himself), and a crowd prefers Barabbas to Jesus (26:69–75; 27:3–10, 15–23).

After Jesus perishes, a series of events hint at the significance of his death (27:51–56). Then Jesus' disciples tend and bury his body, and the Romans set a guard on his tomb in order to prevent false rumors of his resurrection (27:57–66). These feeble attempts to control *rumors* of resurrection cannot thwart God's power or the resurrection itself (28:1–10). After appearing to his disciples on Easter morning, Jesus meets them again in Galilee and commissions them to make disciples of the nations (28:18–20).

Theology of Matthew

IS THERE A THEOLOGY OF MATTHEW?

A quest for the *distinctive* theme of Matthew has limitations, because the four Gospels have more that is common than is distinctive. Each establishes Jesus' identity and presents the same basic outline of his life, with especially similar records of Jesus' last week. Therefore, an attempt to delineate distinct traits of Matthew may suppress the parallels between Matthew and the other Gospels. Still, the Gospels are selective documents that tell less than they know (John 20:30–31; 21:25), so one may ask why Matthew included what he did and why he arranged his account as he did. Thus we may investigate the possibly distinct goals of Matthew.

Matthew sensibly addresses essential topics and goals first and last. His topic is the person and work of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham, Immanuel, and Savior (Matt. 1:1–23). His goal is to lead his readers to faith and to equip them to

make disciples of the nations (28:18–20). Among the canonical Gospels, Matthew contains the largest portion of Jesus’ teaching, all of it suitable for discipleship. Matthew seems to be for teachers and for disciples. As he finishes a discourse on the kingdom, he concludes with an exhortation to share the treasures just received (13:52).

DID MATTHEW WRITE FOR THE JEWS?

It is common to say that Matthew is the Gospel for the Jews, but it is more accurate to say that Matthew wrote for Jewish readers who would embrace the mission of making disciples of the nations. Matthew is not simply “the Gospel for the Jews,” although it is the Gospel most readily *understood* by Jewish readers. When Matthew mentions Jewish customs, he feels no need to explain them. So he refers to fasting (6:16) ritual handwashing (15:2, 10–11; 23:25–26), the temple tax (17:24–27), phylacteries (23:5), and whitewashed tombs (23:27), to name a few, and he explains none of them. He uses Hebrew or Aramaic and does not translate them into Greek in 5:22 and 27:6.⁷ By contrast, John translates even common terms, such as *rabbi* and *messiah* (John 1:38, 41). Further, Matthew frames theological discussions in terms of rabbinic debate. For example, Mark records the general question “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” But Matthew couches the issue in terms of rabbinic debates: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matt. 19:3; cf. Mark 10:2).

Matthew also quotes the OT more than the other Gospel writers do. He quotes the OT eight times in his first four chapters, either introducing the quotation by stating “it is written” or including a note declaring that an event fulfills the quoted OT prophecy. The “it is written” formula highlights the quotations and teaches readers to understand Jesus’ life through the OT (1:22–23; 2:5–6, 17–18; 3:3; 4:4, 7, 10, 14–16). Then, early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes OT law and interprets it six more times (5:21–48). Later, when Pharisees criticize Jesus for dining with tax collectors and sinners, Matthew alone records that Jesus justifies himself by citing OT prophecy: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (9:13; cf. Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32). All of this reflects Matthew’s interest in Israel’s Scriptures.

Matthew’s frequent references to law and righteousness (5:6, 10, 21–48; 6:1, 33) show Jesus’ reverence for both. Jesus’ interpretation of the law simplifies it, which should appeal to pious Jews who do not live like scribes or Pharisees but still pursue holiness. On the other hand, Jesus is eager to interpret the law correctly. He explores its true meaning, sometimes in unexpected ways, yet promises to uphold it (5:17–20).

Matthew also mentions OT characters such as David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah more often than the other Gospel writers do. He alone mentions cities and regions such as Sodom, Zebulun, and Naphtali. Finally, Matthew’s phrasing of Jesus’ language seems to be adapted for Jewish readers. With few exceptions (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43), Matthew has “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God,”

⁷ Since the ESV translates them into English, this is not visible to the English reader.

which Mark and Luke use. Gentiles might not understand “kingdom of heaven,” but Jews would prefer “kingdom of heaven” because it avoids the use of God’s name. These points all suggest that Matthew is most easily understood by Jews.

Matthew also addresses distinctively Jewish concerns. He appeals to Jews who want to know if Jesus is the Messiah. So his genealogy starts with Abraham, father of the Jews. Matthew often calls Jesus “son of David” (9:27; 20:30; 21:9) and “king of the Jews” (2:2; 27:37). And when Jesus is born, magi come to worship Jesus, fulfilling expectations that the nations would come to Israel to worship. So yes, Matthew wrote for Jews. But he included Gentiles, too.

MATTHEW FOR THE GENTILES

Even if all this is correct, it is barely half true to say Matthew wrote for Jews, since his larger purpose is to summon Jews who believe in Jesus to take the message of Christ to Gentiles. Matthew’s interest in Gentiles appears quickly, in the genealogy that traces Jesus’ lineage through several Gentiles: Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (the wife of a Hittite). Because there are only four women in the genealogy, and all three Gentile women had prominent or notorious roles, the careful reader can hardly miss them (1:1–17).

Next, the birth narrative reveals that Gentiles were the first to bow to Jesus, while Herod, the scribes, and the people of Jerusalem were hostile or indifferent (2:1–15). In addition, Jesus’ ministry begins in “Galilee of the Gentiles” (4:15). Before long, Jesus also heals Gentiles. When he heals the servant of a centurion, a Gentile, he declares that he has never seen such faith in Israel (8:5–13). A little later, his presence in the “country of the Gadarenes” puts him in the Decapolis, a Hellenized region east of the Jordan (8:28–34).

Matthew also drops hints that believing Jews had partially broken with Judaism. For example, Matthew’s pronouns commonly put distance between his readers and Judaism. So Matthew speaks of “*their* scribes” (7:29) and “*their* synagogues” (9:35; 10:17). In Matthew the sharpest controversies occur between Jesus and Jewish leaders, who also receive Jesus’ sharpest critique (23:1–36). Jesus also warns that “the sons of the kingdom [Israel] will be thrown into the outer darkness” (8:12). Because they failed to bear fruit, even though he made every provision, he tells them that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (21:43). The people of Jerusalem even appear to curse themselves when they call for Jesus’ crucifixion: “His blood be on us and on our children” (27:25).

Further, passages that apparently limit Jesus’ ministry to Israel actually do the opposite. In his mission discourse, Jesus sends the Twelve to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, forbidding them to go first to Gentiles or Samaritans (10:5–6). But when the disciples are more mature, they will indeed go to the Gentiles: “You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” (10:17–20). Jesus’ encounter with a Syrophenician woman deserves special attention, for it reproves the disciples when they seek to keep

Jesus for themselves. Although the commentary will explain the passage in its place, we may highlight it now.

In 15:21–28, Jesus and his disciples leave Israel, enter Syrophoenician territory, and meet an approaching woman who is pleading for help for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus chooses not to answer, but the woman persists until the disciples, wearied by her petitions, ask him to send her away. He obliges, saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). But she perseveres, begging for help at Jesus’ feet. Jesus responds, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). One supposes that the disciples are pleased that Jesus silences her by calling her a dog. Although the language is strong, at this time Jesus does in fact feed God’s children, Israel, first. Surprisingly, the woman acknowledges Jesus’ rejoinder, then presses on, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (15:27). Perhaps the disciples expect another rejoinder from Jesus. After all, no one has beaten him in a verbal test of wits. Instead, Jesus commends her, “O woman, great is your faith!” and grants her request (15:28).

So a Canaanite prevails. If the encounter stuns the Twelve, it is a jolt they need. The episode functions as an unexplained parable, since no one states the point. The disciples and then the readers must decipher it. What *is* Jesus’ disposition toward Gentile women? What should theirs be? The passage at least suggests that the kingdom has room for Gentiles. When Gentiles approach him in faith, pleading for mercy, he listens. Later, Jesus says not only that Gentiles are permitted to enter the kingdom but also that his disciples must go and instruct them, baptize them, and make them disciples.

DISCIPLES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

By closing with the commission to make disciples, Matthew creates feedback loops. First, the charge to teach all that Jesus has commanded leads teachers to consider where they might find Jesus’ commands. Skilled readers will realize that the Gospel they have just read contains them. Indeed, Matthew contains teaching that addresses most of the questions a young disciple might ask. Further, in the ideal reader’s second journey through Matthew, he may notice that the Twelve take a path resembling his own. Matthew presents the disciples rather sympathetically, but they are, in a distinctly Matthean term, *oligopistoi*, people or men of little faith.⁸ Overall, in Matthew the disciples are men of weak but growing faith. They learn fitfully and erratically, moving from great confessions to pitiful errors with remarkable ease. But they listen, recover, and grow until they become *apostles* who are ready to implement the Great Commission.

If literary theorists are right, readers (or listeners) typically work through an engaging text or presentation looking for someone with whom to identify. But with whom can an interested reader of Matthew identify? The Jewish leaders are too hostile and legalistic. Jesus is too noble. The crowds are too shallow, marveling at his works yet finally comprehending nothing. The disciples are the remaining

⁸ *Oligopistoi* appears five times in the NT, in Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8 (cf. 17:20); and Luke 12:28.

option, and they hold a certain attraction. They follow Jesus, listen, and ask questions. Their errors may even invite the reader who groans at their flaws to imagine, “I would understand. I would be the loyal disciple Jesus deserves.” Along that line, Matthew lets everyone read Jesus’ words as direct addresses or direct commands to “you.” In the long blocks of teaching, readers hear Jesus’ voice uninterrupted. As paragraphs roll by, he seems to address you and me, today.

A neophyte might eventually realize that Matthew is the ideal reader of his own Gospel. He follows Jesus, watches, listens, falters, repents, and receives the commission to disciple the nations. To be ready for that noble charge, he had to grow, appropriating what Jesus said, grasping the meaning of events. Matthew began as a man of little faith, but he persevered, he pondered, until he was ready to write a book that invited the world to become Jesus’ disciples. The aspirational reader might think, “Matthew experienced the very transformation I seek. He traveled from little faith to a faith great enough to write this book.” So Matthew desired his Gospel to do to his readers what the gospel did for him. His encounter with Jesus equipped him to write the Gospel that would become the source for all who train disciples.

If this seems hypothetical, remember that Matthew twice says that he intends to equip teachers and disciple makers, in chapter 28 and chapter 13. There he compares disciples to householders who share, from their treasure, truths new and old (13:51–52).

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

RELATIONSHIP TO THE REST OF THE BIBLE

Matthew shows how Jesus fulfills the hopes of Israel. He is the Son of Abraham and the Son of David. Through him, God fulfills his promises to Israel. In him all the families of the earth are blessed (Gen. 12:3).

Jesus fulfills every OT theme. He fulfills the law by plumbing its depths, explaining it masterfully, and keeping it perfectly. He completes the prophets by declaring the Word fearlessly, gently, and powerfully. He fulfills the prophets by completing every prophetic word about the coming salvation and restoration of God’s people. Above all, he *is* the Word. He completes the work of the priests by offering himself on the cross as the final sacrifice for sin. Like a faithful priest, he also prays and cares for his people. He is the true Judge, knowing and assessing the hearts of all flesh. He completes the temple, for it represented the presence of God, and Jesus *is* God’s presence. He is the wisdom of God, the friend of his people, the second Adam, the true Israel, the servant of Yahweh, and more. Instead of dipping into each of these themes, it may be wise to go deeper with one representative example, Jesus as King of Israel.

In biblical history, this theme begins in the disastrous era of the judges. At that time Israel had no king, and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). So they asked for a king “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5). They got precisely that in Saul. Like the kings of the nations, Saul was proud and

self-serving. After the glory days of Saul's successors David and Solomon, half of the southern kings and every northern king led Israel astray. Some actively promoted the worship of pagan deities. Failed monarchs were antikings who showed how the Messiah would *not* rule. Israel enjoyed a few noble kings, but grave flaws marred even the best. The righteous kings performed royal tasks: they protected Israel from her enemies, provided prosperity, upheld the law, and established justice, but Jesus executes every kingly task without flaw or sin. He crushes the enemies of his people, protects them by his Spirit, and guides them by his laws.

If the Gospels complete the OT, they also inaugurate the rest of the NT by providing the narrative to which Acts adds and the narrative on which the Epistles comment. Matthew, like the other Gospels, narrates the central moment of redemptive history—indeed, the climax of all human history.

TESTIMONY TO CHRIST

To grasp the role of Matthew in the canon, one must know his characters, especially Jesus. Matthew's portrait of Jesus emerges by direct and indirect means. He declares Jesus' identity directly through titles—"titular Christology"—and indirectly through descriptions of his work—"functional Christology." Titular Christology examines the labels ascribed to Jesus in Matthew. Functional Christology examines the way Jesus' actions reveal his self-understanding. The two overlap when, for example, Jesus both functions as a prophet and is called a prophet.

This commentary considers the titles of Jesus as they arise in the text. Many appear near the beginning, including Christ (Messiah), Son of David, Immanuel, and Lord. The direct claims of deity, reasonably common in John, are rare in Matthew. In John, Jesus declares, "Before Abraham was, I am" and "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 8:58; 11:25). Perhaps the closest parallel to this in Matthew occurs when Peter tells Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and Jesus replies, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16–17).

Matthew's functional Christology is richer. In Matthew, Jesus' words and deeds reveal his self-conception. In short, Jesus implies that he is God "by exercising the functions, assuming the prerogatives, or accepting honors that properly belong to God alone."⁹ That is, Jesus acts in ways that show he knows he is both God and Messiah throughout his ministry, as an array of passages in Matthew show. Jesus implicitly claims deity in many ways in Matthew; we will mention ten.

First, Jesus claims the right to judge mankind because he knows the hearts and thoughts of men (9:4; 12:25; 22:18). Therefore, he is able to reward "each person according to what he has done" (16:27) and so grant or prohibit entry into his kingdom (7:22–23; 13:41; 25:34, 41).

Second, he forgives sins on his own authority, far from the temple and without the prescribed sacrifices (9:2).

⁹ Daniel M. Doriani, "The Deity of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels," *JETS* 37/3 (1994): 333–350, on 350. The following section follows this article closely.

Third, he asserts that his presence is God's presence (12:5–6). Like God, he is omnipresent; he is always with his disciples (18:20; 28:20).

Fourth, the attitude people take toward him will determine their eternal destiny. He grants life to all who know and confess him truly (7:21–27; 10:32–33). He demands that his disciples love him more than family or life itself (10:37–39; 16:24–26).

Fifth, Jesus says, "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (10:40). Thus whatever anyone does to or for him, they do to or for God.

Sixth, Jesus teaches the truth on his own authority. He knows his words have supreme importance; they must be taught to the nations (28:18–20). They also possess supreme authority; they never fail (24:35). Moreover, while the prophets habitually spoke on God's authority ("Thus says the LORD"), Jesus speaks on his own authority, saying, "Truly, I say to you." He does this thirty times in Matthew to underscore the importance of a new revelation (10:15; 17:20; 18:18) or to explain the full meaning of the law (5:22, 28; 6:5).

Seventh, similarly, Jesus performs miracles on his own authority. In OT miracles, whenever God's servants explain how a mighty deed occurs, they ascribe it to God's will and power. But Jesus acts and heals on his own initiative, by his own power (8:1–4; 20:29–34).

Eighth, Jesus lets people bow before him in settings that signify worship, or at least great reverence (8:2; 9:18; 15:25). This is most striking after the resurrection (28:9, 17) and after Jesus calms a storm at sea. There we read, "Those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:33).

Ninth, Jesus assumes that his life is a pattern for others, that it is a "divinely authoritative form of life."¹⁰ If Jesus denies his family (12:46–50), his disciples must do so as well (10:37). If Jesus goes to the cross, his disciples must be willing, in principle, to join him: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (16:21–26).

Tenth, Jesus applies to himself OT texts that describe God. When the chief priests and scribes criticize the children who shout "Hosanna" as Jesus enters Jerusalem, he replies, "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise" (Matt. 21:16). This comes from Psalm 8:2, which is addressed to God. It begins "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name" (8:1). So Jesus takes the praise of God from the OT and applies it to himself.¹¹

Preaching from Matthew

This commentary intends to assist preachers and teachers as they interpret and proclaim the Word. Such assistance regularly appears in the Response sections of the exposition, but it is sensible to comment here on the challenges in preaching from the moral instruction, the parables, and the miracles of Matthew.

¹⁰ Royce Gordon Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 31.

¹¹ R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 310.

INTERPRETING JESUS' MORAL INSTRUCTION

The interpretation of Jesus' teaching seems straightforward, but it is worthwhile to remember that for Jesus and Israel, the law is more than a moral, behavioral, legal, or penal code. It does more than describe what acts are evil and what can be prosecuted. Jesus' abiding interest in the motivation for behavior demonstrates this fact (5:21–48; 22:34–40). His accent on the heart as the source of every word and deed makes the same point (5:8, 28; 6:21; 9:4; 12:33–35; 13:15–19; 15:17–20; 18:35; 19:8). Jesus' teaching is Torah: instruction in the good life for individuals and for society.

The majority of Jesus' commands are second-person plural: they speak to disciples and groups and aim for a righteous or paradigmatic society.¹² This is obvious in the OT, where God's law shapes a nation with borders and a legal system. But it is in both the OT and the NT that instruction shapes life in the covenantal community. Laws shape more than personal behavior; they create a well-ordered society in which it is easier to resolve conflicts, restrict abuses, protect the innocent, and restrain evildoers, whomever they target, whether weak or powerful.

Theologians classically say that the law has three uses: to restrain sin in civil society, to reveal sin and so lead sinners to see their need of Christ, and to instruct disciples in the way of godliness. This certainly holds true for the teachings of Jesus, although the second and third uses seem more prominent in Matthew. When we focus on the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching seems both daunting and appealing. Jesus proclaims his will, his standards, with startling clarity, but if he is simply issuing commands, his clarity is a burden and his commands condemn, since no one can keep them.

The Sermon on the Mount has pervasive imperatival thrust. In it, Christ prohibits anger, lust, careless speech, love of praise, and worry. He commands generosity, love of enemies, and nonretaliation, even commanding disciples to be perfect. Eventually, readers realize that this defies their capacity, and Jesus' moral vision becomes demoralizing.¹³ This should lead to self-examination, repentance, and faith in the Lord who first commands and then gives himself, on the cross, for those who cannot obey these commands.

Some analysts consider many of Jesus' commands, such as "turn the other cheek," to be completely impractical in a fallen world. If a nation turned the other cheek, invaders would soon overrun them. If disciples gave to *everyone* who asked, they would soon be impoverished. These issues have led scholars to propose various interpretive structures for Jesus' teaching. Perhaps, Thomas Aquinas proposed, the most daunting commands are counsels of perfection that none but elite Christians should attempt to follow. Lutheran theologians stress that the law is a tutor that leads sinners to Christ. Some Christians have stressed the need for literal obedience, whatever the cost. It is better to note that most of Jesus' commands are primarily for disciples, although outsiders are always welcome to listen. For believers, Jesus'

¹² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

¹³ Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 2–9.

commands are the narrow but good path; for outsiders, they call for repentance and faith. So the commands, challenging as they are, entice people to keep reading till the end, when Jesus gives his life as a ransom for sinners (cf. 20:28).

INTERPRETING PARABLES

Depending on the way in which one categorizes short parables or figures of speech, there are fifteen to twenty-seven parables in Matthew, covering up to 185 verses. Parables become more prominent when opposition to Jesus grows in chapter 13. Definitions of *parable* vary. Matthew first uses the Greek term *parabolē* in 13:3. He regularly uses it for the long stories we typically call parables (13:1–9; 18:21–35), but he also calls proverbs and word pictures “parables” in 13:31–33; 24:32 (Gk.). If they are parables, then other word pictures are too (7:9–14; 9:15–17). At any rate, the Greek term has a broad range of meaning.

Among the many fine works on parables, there are interesting definitions of *parable*. Robert Stein defines a parable minimally as a “figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison.” He also cites a definition that calls a parable an “earthly story” that conveys a “moral or spiritual principle.”¹⁴ Klyne Snodgrass defined a parable as a story with two levels of meaning: “The story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood.” So, he continued, “parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”¹⁵ C. H. Dodd called a parable a “metaphor or simile drawn from nature or life arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, leaving the mind in enough doubt about its significance to tease it into active thought.” Clearly, Dodd’s definition also arrests hearers and teases minds.¹⁶

Craig Blomberg argued that parables are low-level allegories. Longer parables (and some short ones) typically have a God-like figure—a king, master, or father—and one or two subordinates. If there are two subordinates, one is likely to be faithful, the other unfaithful. These three characters will ordinarily reveal something about God and his reign and something about the way disciples and unbelievers respond to him. The leading figure may also resemble Christ or foreshadow aspects of his work (18:21–35; 21:33–46). A parable with three characters will probably have three points, not five or ten, making them low-level allegories.

Allegory, Blomberg says, is a rhetorical device that gives symbolic dimension to a text but need not lead to unbridled embellishment. A parable may signal an additional layer of meaning when a realistic story takes an extravagant or unrealistic detail. When an interpreter sees a potentially allegorical element, he may state it with this form: “A is to B as a is to b with respect to x.” In the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, it would run like this: “The giver of the banquet is to the invitees as Jesus is to the Jews, in that the expected guests did not come to the party, so the party giver invited outcasts to take their place.” The formulation proves nothing in and of itself, but it does help interpreters to ask good questions.

¹⁴ Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 22, 15, respectively.

¹⁵ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” in *DJG*, 594.

¹⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (London: James Nisbet, 1961), 5.

The commentary on Matthew 13 explores the cluster of eight parables that build on the foundational story of a sower. Matthew's parables tend to focus on grace, discipleship, kingdom life, and controversy.

INTERPRETING MIRACLES

The Role of Miracles in Jesus' Ministry

The Gospels teach faithful readers to expect layers of meaning in miracle accounts.¹⁷ Miracles, like parables, instruct disciples in the ways of God and his kingdom. The difference is that parables are instructive fiction while miracles are instructive facts. But there are misconceptions about miracles and Jesus' ministry. Some say Jesus' miracles manifest his deity. But if Jesus' miracles prove his deity, what do the miracles of Moses, Elisha, and Paul prove? Others say miracles instill or reward faith. Perhaps, but Jesus healed crowds of the sick, including unbelievers.

Matthew connects miracles to the coming of the kingdom when he says that Jesus came "teaching . . . proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease" (4:23; 9:35). Later, when he commissioned the apostles, Jesus instructed them, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (10:7–8). Teaching and healing are two forms of kingdom activity; the kingdom embraces mind and body, spirit and flesh. Miracles demonstrate that the kingdom has arrived. Not all disease is the consequence of personal sin, but miracles do break Satan's power (Luke 13:16). Matthew 7–8 links Jesus' words and works. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, bystanders marvel at Jesus' authoritative teaching. Next, Jesus' authoritative word changes the external world, as he cleanses a leper (8:3), heals a centurion's servant (8:8, 13), casts out demons (8:16), stills seas (8:26), expels demons (8:32), and forgives sin (9:6), all by a word. In Matthew, Jesus may choose to heal *with* a touch, but he does not heal *by* a touch.

Matthew sees connections between miracles and three OT themes. First, in 8:14–17, he links miracles to Isaiah's prophecy of God's suffering servant (Isa. 53:4). Second, miracles provide evidence that Jesus is the Promised One (Matt. 11:2–5; Isa. 29:18–19; 35:3–10). Third, the healings point to God's salvation (Matt. 1:21; 8:25; 9:1–8, 21–22).

The Nature of Miracles

In ordinary language, a miracle is an amazing event, rousing wonder. Unfortunately, this language allows one to speak of miracle drugs, the miracle of birth, and miraculous feats in sports or engineering. In the philosophy of science, a miracle is a nonrepeatable counterinstance to a law of nature. In religion, it is an extraordinary event wrought by a god, with spiritual significance. One theologian said that *physically*, miracles are unusual enough to draw the attention of observers,

¹⁷ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 169–210.

while *theologically*, they are acts of God, and *morally*, they disclose God's character and promote faith.¹⁸

There is no technical term for miracle in the OT; a variety of terms labeled events as signs or wonders. The NT has three semiformal terms: sign (Gk. *sēmeion*), wonder (*teras*), and mighty deed (*dynamis*). Matthew rarely uses these to narrate miracles. If anything, Matthew's narratives speak of healing (*therapeuō*) or salvation (*sōzō*). "Sign" most often appears in controversies between the Pharisees, who demand signs, and Jesus, who chastises them for making such demands (12:38–39; 16:1–4).

In Scripture, miracles are never empty marvels. In John, Jesus multiplies loaves then says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:1–14, 35, 51), or says, "I am the light of the world" then heals a blind man (John 8:12; 9:1–7). In Scripture, miracles are the Creator's acts, not violations of natural law.

This commentary defines a miracle as a direct, unmediated act of God in the external world, where he works outside (not against) the common course of events to reveal himself, authenticate his servants, and manifest himself and his redemptive purposes. This definition excludes daily "miracles," such as the birth of a child, and excludes private events, such as answers to prayer. It includes the idea that miracles are public acts that demand attention, positive or negative, from all who witness them (Matt. 12:23–24; John 11:47). In Matthew, no one doubts Jesus' *power*; they question its source and direction. Matthew believes that Jesus' miracles verify his message and inspire faith (8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28).

The Significance of Miracles

In the Gospels, fully reported miracles commonly have a narrative arc that reveals its main point either at the dramatic climax or in statements made immediately before or after that climax. Miracle narratives typically have several characters, with Jesus at the center. Various observers respond faithfully or unfaithfully. If we see the story through their eyes, we can locate proper and improper ways of responding to God's work that apply even today. Some miracle accounts are short reports that advance the narrative arc (8:14–17; 15:29–16:12) of the Gospel as a whole. Others are best read as speech stories in which the miracle sets up a speech that is weightier than the act itself (8:5–13). In long narratives, not especially common in Matthew, narrative subtypes emerge. In a test, the human protagonist may face a test of character (14:22–33). Or he may be on a quest that he performs according to his ability to persevere (15:21–28; in 19:16–22 a quest fails due to lack of resolve). These points create lines of application for preachers. Expositions can focus first on Jesus' redemptive work, then notice the ways believers, unbelievers, or "neutral" observers respond faithfully or unfaithfully to God's actions.¹⁹ All of this holds for Matthew, but as his Gospel includes more teaching, it correspondingly includes

¹⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 93–126.

¹⁹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

less narrative detail. So it seems that Matthew is “less concerned with providing well-told stories” than in presenting Jesus’ character and teaching.²⁰

It can seem that every miracle makes the same point: behold the power of God’s Son! But wise preachers can locate ample diversity in miracle narratives. First, Jesus’ miracles call attention to his identity. Every miracle reveals Jesus’ character, plans, or goals. They summon readers to pay attention, to see that Jesus is Lord of mankind, Lord of nature, sin, and disease, Lord over Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female. No problem or adversary is beyond his power. He cures the incurable, thwarts demons, and effectively commands nature to obey him (humans command too, but ineffectively). Therefore miracles compel witnesses to ask, “Who is this?” (21:10; Luke 8:25; cf. John 3:2). Matthew answers that he is “the one who is to come” and the “Son of God” (Matt. 11:3; 14:33). So miracles reveal Jesus’ identity.

Second, miracles reveal Jesus’ character, a character that shapes his disciples. When Matthew names a motive for a miracle, it is often mercy or compassion (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). Third, miracles redeem God’s people, saving them in body as well as spirit, from sin (1:21), from disease (9:21), from death (16:25). Fourth, miracles reverse the consequences of sin. Jesus has the right to nullify the curse because he deals with sin and its penalty on the cross. Thus every miracle presents Christ’s full-orbed redemptive work. Fifth, therefore, the restorative element of miracles adumbrates the proper and future condition of mankind and creation, when sin, corruption, and evil have ended.

In all of this, sixth, miracles testify that the king has come and inaugurated his kingdom. In one sense, all miracles make one point: Jesus is Lord and Redeemer and thus worthy of faith. Miracles may or may not reward prior faith, and they certainly do not compel it—hence Jesus refused to perform signs on demand (16:1–4). But, seventh, miracles do promote faith, a truth prominent in one-on-one encounters.

So miracle narratives have common themes, yet they also disclose discrete facets of Jesus’ character and work, nudging listeners to believe and offering teachers several avenues for presenting the claims Jesus makes through his miracles.

EXCURSUS ON THE HISTORICITY OF MIRACLES

This introduction previously defended the historical reliability of Matthew in general terms, but the claim that Jesus taught, gathered disciples, and died after conflict with authorities is hardly controversial. Miracles are another matter and require another defense.

Miracles are prominent in Matthew. There are, depending on one’s view of the transfiguration and Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, twenty to twenty-two narrative accounts of a distinct miracle. On four additional occasions Matthew notes that Jesus healed “many” or “the sick” or “great crowds” (4:24; 8:16; 14:35–36; 15:30). Skeptics consider miracle accounts to be fabrications or misunderstandings.

²⁰ Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 84.

Naturalistic scholars may concede that Jesus “healed” the sick, but they deny that supernatural forces operated in him. They may concede that Jesus’ touch brought relief to men and women who suffered psychosomatic illness. Exorcisms, they say, are cases of tenderness curing hysteria. Further, when Jesus touched, accepted, and shared table fellowship with the sick, it changed their social status, ending their social ostracism and thus “healing” them socially. As for the healing of lepers, John Dominic Crossan argues, “I presume that Jesus, who did not and could not heal that disease or any other one, healed the man’s illness by refusing to accept the disease’s ritual uncleanness and social ostracization.” He healed the social illness, the way the leper was perceived in society, by touching him “without curing the disease.” Jesus performed his miracle in the social world, not the physical world.²¹

This construal of Jesus’ work allows “miracles” without recourse to the supernatural. By this reckoning, Jesus could not calm storms, walk on water, multiply loaves of bread, or rise after dying (he awoke after swooning). Jesus was a charismatic teacher and reformer, no more. This approach allowed one author to say Jesus did not multiply bread; he shared his meager supply, but it was enough because Jesus had touched it.

Heinrich Paulus sought a natural cause for every miracle. Miracle reports, he said, arose from eyewitnesses who saw Jesus’ cures but knew nothing of the means he used. Since they were credulous, they ascribed cures to God’s direct agency. Paulus believed Jesus cured people by using “medicines known to Him alone.”²² For Paulus, those who thought they witnessed Jesus’ control of nature naively misunderstood what they saw; Jesus did not command the wind to cease—it simply died away as he spoke (cf. 8:23–27). Again, Jesus never walked on water (cf. 14:22–33); the disciples *thought* he did, but they lost their bearings during the night, drifted toward land unknowingly, and saw Jesus walking on the shore or in shallow water while a morning mist obscured his feet. (Amazingly, one scholar proposed that Jesus walked to the disciples on submerged logs, indicating either that he has no knowledge of that endeavor or that he believes in miracles after all.)

In this perspective, the feeding of the five thousand becomes a case of reluctant sharing. A crowd was hungry, and when Jesus began to share his provisions, everyone joined in, and soon there was food to share.²³ A more insidious proposal says Jesus stocked a cave with bread and fish in advance. Hidden inside, the disciples furtively handed him food, which he dispersed, feigning an ability to multiply food. In this reckoning, Jesus leads a band of deceivers that dupes an assembly of dolts.

Some antisupernaturalists decline even to explain the *origin* of the nature miracles accounts, but many attempt to locate a kernel of historical or spiritual truth that flowered into a miracle myth that is not exactly false even if the miracle never quite happened. Some evangelical writers falter here. Graham Twelftree labors for

21 John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 341; Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 82.

22 From the summary of Paulus’s work in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (1906; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1968), 50–57, on 52.

23 *Ibid.*, 52.

thirty-seven pages before reaching the tepid conclusion that “It is quite reasonable to suppose that miracles are possible” and “Such miracles as are reflected in the Gospel stories are likely to have happened.”²⁴ Later Twelftree dithers and vacillates when assessing whether Jesus and Peter actually walked on water.²⁵

Rather recently, Bart Ehrman has argued that rational people must take a critical posture toward miracle accounts. First, miracles were understood differently in the ancient world. “Ancient people almost never asked whether the divine realm intervened in the human; they instead asked when and where this happened.” So the ancients lacked proper skepticism about miracle claims. Second, Ehrman says, “Today miracles are understood as events at odds with how the natural world typically works, based on scientific understandings developed since the Enlightenment. . . . This means that miracles are, necessarily, the most improbable of events.” Third, historians seek to construct the most likely explanation of reports of past events. Since a miracle is, by definition, “the most improbable event,” an objective historian can never show that a miracle is the most probable explanation of a past event. Ehrman asserts that ancient witnesses were naive. Therefore, if they described events that defied “historical probability,” we must conclude that they erred, exaggerated, or lied. Ehrman admits that individuals are free to believe miracle stories as a matter of religious conviction if they wish, but no historian can claim that a miracle actually occurred.²⁶

Paulus follows, and Ehrman paraphrases, the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, whose *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* articulated the classic argument against miracles: “A miracle is a violation of the law of nature. . . . [Since] firm and unalterable experience has established these laws,” it is impossible to construct an argument for miracles from experience. Hume asserts that no one ever sees exceptions to the laws of nature. Specifically, “That a dead man should come to life . . . has never been observed in any age or country.”²⁷

The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church that five hundred people saw the risen Lord. Many of them were still alive when he wrote, Paul says, implying that readers could verify his claim by consulting the witnesses. Hume judges Paul’s claim to be an impossibility. He knows that people reported that they had seen miracles, but he dismisses these as exaggerated reports resulting from emotional excess, ignorance, and barbarism.²⁸ Hume claims that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony comes from a source that is so reliable that it would be a greater miracle for that source to lie or err.²⁹

Hume argues that several factors mitigate against testimonies to miracles. First, those who testify to them lack the “good sense, education, and learning” that

24 Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 52.

25 *Ibid.*, 130–132.

26 Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 226–230.

27 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1902 [orig. 1748]; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), sec. 10.90, pp. 114–115.

28 *Ibid.*, sec. 10.94, p. 119.

29 *Ibid.*, sec. 10.91, p. 116.

ordinarily keep men from falling to delusions.³⁰ Second, humans enjoy sensational stories, which leads them to pass on accounts of miracles.³¹ Third, miracle stories flourish among the religious who are tempted to promote tales they “know . . . to be false” since they promote a holy cause. Worse, some prey on the “credulity” of ignorant followers. That is, miracle accounts “abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.”³² Fourth, since miracles support contrary religious systems, they cancel each other out.³³

Further, Hume argues that miracle accounts can never be trusted because a miracle violates that which is inviolable: the laws of nature. Since the testimony to the constancy of natural laws is overwhelming, no contrary testimony can rightly be believed: “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be.”³⁴ Since all miracle accounts contradict the laws of observation, anyone who reports such a miracle is either a deceiver or deceived. No matter the nobility or number of witnesses to a miracle, Hume says, “no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof.” It is always more likely that the “witness” has erred.³⁵

Hume’s account draws criticism on several fronts. For this introduction it is vital to notice that when he calls a miracle a “violation of the laws of nature,” he assumes the existence of “laws of nature”³⁶—the existence of which cannot be proved by his inductive method. More importantly, his account assumes what is to be proved: that there is no god (or no god who acts) and that the universe is governed by “laws of nature.” So Hume assumes that the world is a closed system of cause and effect. But if there is a God who created the world and cares for it, then miracles are plausible.

In that spirit, Craig Keener has meticulously compiled and annotated numerous eyewitness testimonies of miracles from witnesses scattered over the world. He concluded that hundreds of millions of living witnesses claim they have witnessed miraculous or supernatural healings. This writer is among them.³⁷ The principles of inductive reasoning, advocated by Hume himself, cannot discard so much data. Despite his inductive approach, Hume’s rejection of miracles actually rests on his conviction that miracles are impossible in a world that disallows incursions from the outside. From a Christian perspective, theism makes the miraculous possible, and the witnesses make miracles credible. If the resurrection occurred—and there is massive evidence that it did—the rest follows.³⁸ In that case, Matthew offers a reliable account of the acts of Jesus and of their abiding meaning.

³⁰ Ibid., sec. 10.93, p. 117.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., sec. 10.94, p. 119.

³³ Ibid., sec. 10.5, p. 121.

³⁴ Ibid., sec. 10.90, p. 114.

³⁵ Ibid., sec. 10.98, p. 127.

³⁶ Ibid., sec. 10.90, 97, 99; pp. 114, 126, 128.

³⁷ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

³⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, COQG (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

A Word on Sources

I have found conventions of citations daunting for this work, since I have taught twenty-five courses on Matthew, the Gospels, or the life of Christ and have preached through Matthew twice. Readers may consult the list of sources that informed this book; other works appear in the footnotes. I have read some of these works repeatedly, especially required readings for academic courses and books that were singularly helpful for sermon preparation. It seems that the most trusted and insightful sources have entered my mind thoroughly enough that it is difficult to know where their thought ends and mine begins. Bauckham, Blomberg, Bruce, Carson, Calvin, Frame, Garland, Hagner, Jeremias, Keener, Kingsbury, Metzger, Morris, Stein, and Wright have been influential, and I often follow my own works on interpretation. That said, my chief source for this book is the text of Matthew, read and reread in English and in Greek, with grammars, lexicons, concordances, and dictionaries at my elbow. I cite these rarely, since much the same information appears in multiple sources. At times, this commentary resembles my longer homiletical commentary on Matthew for the Reformed Expository Commentary series with P&R. The common thread lies not in that printed work but in the lecture and sermon notes that sourced both works.

Outline

- I. The Origin, Birth, and Identity of Jesus (1:1–2:23)
 - A. The Genealogy of Jesus (1:1–17)
 - B. The Origin of Jesus (1:18–25)
 - C. The Visit of the Magi (2:1–12)
 - D. The Rage of Herod and the Protection of God (2:13–23)
 1. Flight to Egypt (2:13–15)
 2. The Slaughter in Bethlehem (2:16–18)
 3. The Return to Nazareth (2:19–23)
- II. The Preparation and Early Ministry in Galilee (3:1–4:25)
 - A. The Ministry of John the Baptist (3:1–17)
 1. The Prophetic Ministry of John (3:1–12)
 2. John's Baptism of Jesus (3:13–17)
 - B. The Temptation of Jesus (4:1–11)
 - C. Jesus' Initial Ministry in Galilee (4:12–25)
 1. First Steps in Galilee (4:12–17)
 2. Calling the First Disciples (4:18–22)
 3. Proclamation of the Kingdom in Word and Deed (4:23–25)
- III. The First Discourse: Discipleship in Jesus' Kingdom (5:1–7:29)
 - A. Overture to the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–16)
 1. The Setting (5:1–2)
 2. The Beatitudes (5:3–12)
 3. The Response to the Blessed: Persecution and Praise (5:13–16)

- B. Jesus Explores True Righteousness (5:17–48)
 - 1. A Surpassing Righteousness (5:17–20)
 - 2. Anger and Reconciliation (5:21–26)
 - 3. Lust and Purity (5:27–30)
 - 4. Divorce and Remarriage (5:31–32)
 - 5. Oaths and Honesty (5:33–37)
 - 6. Returning Good for Evil (5:38–42)
 - 7. Loving Enemies (5:43–48)
- C. Jesus Explores Hypocritical and Sincere Religion (6:1–18)
 - 1. Alms (6:1–4)
 - 2. Prayer (6:5–15)
 - 3. Fasting (6:16–18)
- D. The Truly Religious Trust God (6:19–34)
 - 1. Serving God Rather Than Mammon (6:19–24)
 - 2. Trusting God Rather Than Worrying (6:25–34)
- E. Jesus Calls to Discipleship (7:1–12)
 - 1. No Judgment, Unless Necessary (7:1–6)
 - 2. Ask, Seek, Knock (7:7–12)
- F. Jesus Calls to Decision (7:13–27)
 - 1. Two Paths (7:13–14)
 - 2. Two Trees (7:15–20)
 - 3. Two Ways to Call on Christ (7:21–23)
 - 4. Two Foundations (7:24–27)
- G. The Authority of Jesus (7:28–29)
- IV. The Kingdom's Growth under Jesus' Authority (8:1–11:1)
 - A. Signs and Conversations (8:1–9:38)
 - 1. Healing a Leper (8:1–4)
 - 2. Healing a Centurion's Servant (8:5–13)
 - 3. Healing Peter's Mother-in-Law and Many More (8:14–17)
 - 4. The Cost of Following Jesus (8:18–22)
 - 5. Calming a Storm (8:23–27)
 - 6. Casting Out Demons (8:28–34)
 - 7. Healing a Paralytic and Forgiving His Sins (9:1–8)
 - 8. Calling Matthew and Eating with Sinners (9:9–13)
 - 9. No Time for Fasting (9:14–17)
 - 10. Raising a Dead Girl and Healing a Sick Woman (9:18–26)
 - 11. Healing the Blind (9:27–31)
 - 12. Casting Demons from the Dumb (9:32–34)
 - 13. Context: The Need for Workers (9:35–38)
 - B. The Second Discourse: The Disciples Follow Jesus into Mission (10:1–11:1)
 - 1. Jesus Calls Disciples to the Mission (10:1–4)
 - 2. Disciples Follow the Ministry Practices of Jesus (10:5–10)

3. Disciples Stay in Worthy Houses (10:11–15)
 4. Disciples Prepare for Impending Trouble (10:16–21)
 5. Disciples Persevere by Flight, by Imitating Jesus (10:22–25)
 6. Disciples Remain Fearless (10:26–31)
 7. Disciples Confess Christ (10:32–33)
 8. Disciples Love Christ More Than Family, Life Itself (10:34–39)
 9. Jesus Honors His Servants (10:40–42)
 10. Transition to Ongoing Ministry (11:1)
- V. The Kingdom's Growth in the Face of Resistance (11:2–13:58)
- A. John and Jesus (11:2–19)
 1. John Doubts Jesus' Status (11:2–3)
 2. Jesus Assures John of His Status (11:4–6)
 3. Jesus Commends John as Prophet and Agent of the Kingdom (11:7–15)
 4. Jesus Rebukes a Fickle Generation (11:16–19)
 - B. Jesus Rebukes and Invites His Generation (11:20–30)
 1. Jesus Warns Impenitent Cities of Israel (11:20–24)
 2. Jesus Describes the Revelation of the Father (11:25–27)
 3. Jesus Invites All to Come to Him for Rest (11:28–30)
 - C. Sabbath Conflicts (12:1–14)
 1. Jesus Defends the Activity of His Band on the Sabbath (12:1–8)
 2. Jesus Heals a Man on the Sabbath, Prompting Conspiracy (12:9–14)
 - D. Revelation and Opposition (12:15–45)
 1. Jesus' Gentle Ministry Fulfills Isaiah (12:15–21)
 2. Jesus Heals a Blind and Mute Man, Prompting Controversy (12:22–24)
 3. Jesus Refutes Absurd Accusations (12:25–28)
 4. Jesus Names His Strength and the Work of the Spirit (12:29–32)
 5. Jesus Diagnoses That Evil Words Have an Evil Source (12:33–37)
 6. Jesus Refuses a Request for More Signs (12:38–42)
 7. Jesus Warns Sinners of the Consequences of Impenitence (12:43–45)
 - E. Jesus Describes His True Family (12:46–50)
 - F. Third Discourse: Parables of the Kingdom (13:1–52)
 1. The Kingdom Is Like a Sower Whose Seed Bears Variable Fruit (13:1–9)
 2. Note: Parables Give to Some and Take from Others (13:10–17)
 3. The Parable of the Sower Explained (13:18–23)
 4. The Parable of Wheat and Weeds (13:24–30)
 5. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31–32)

6. The Parable of the Yeast (13:33)
 7. Note: Parables Fulfill Prophecy (13:34–35)
 8. The Parable of Wheat and Weeds Explained (13:36–43)
 9. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (13:44)
 10. The Parable of the Costly Pearl (13:45–46)
 11. The Parable of the Net and Its Interpretation (13:47–50)
 12. Note: Understanding and Teaching the Nature of the Kingdom (13:51–52)
- G. Disrespect for Jesus in His Hometown (13:53–58)
- VI. Training the Disciples among Crowds and Leaders (14:1–20:34)
- A. Herod Murders John the Baptist (14:1–12)
1. Herod's Guilt over John (14:1–2)
 2. Herod's Senseless Execution of John (14:3–12)
- B. Jesus Feeds Five Thousand (14:13–21)
- C. Jesus Walks on the Water (14:22–33)
- D. Jesus' Ongoing Healing Ministry (14:34–36)
- E. Jesus and the Tradition of the Elders (15:1–20)
- F. Jesus Heals a Canaanite Woman's Daughter (15:21–28)
- G. Jesus Heals Many, Culminating in a Feeding of Four Thousand (15:29–39)
- H. The Pharisees and Sadducees Demand Signs (16:1–4)
- I. The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5–12)
- J. Peter Confesses That Jesus Is the Christ (16:13–20)
- K. Jesus Explains His Messianic Work (16:21–28)
1. The Necessity of the Cross (16:21–23)
 2. The Cross and Discipleship (16:24–28)
- L. The Transfiguration (17:1–13)
1. Jesus Shines in Glory (17:1–4)
 2. The Father States His Pleasure (17:5–6)
 3. The Disciples Struggle to Understand (17:7–13)
- M. The Healing of a Demonized Boy (17:14–20)
1. Jesus Encounters and Rebukes a Demon (17:14–18)
 2. The Power of Prayer (17:19–20; 17:21 does not appear in the best early texts)
- N. Jesus Predicts His Death Again (17:22–23)
- O. Jesus Pays the Temple Tax (17:24–27)
- P. Fourth Discourse: Community Life in the Kingdom (18:1–35)
1. Greatness and Humility (18:1–4)
 2. Causing No One to Sin (18:5–9)
 3. The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10–14)
 4. Proper Treatment of a Brother Who Sins (18:15–20)
 5. A Question about Forgiveness (18:21–22)
 6. A Parable Motivating Forgiveness (18:23–35)

- Q. A Question about Divorce (19:1–12)
 - 1. Jesus Corrects the Impulse for Lax Divorce (19:1–9)
 - 2. Jesus Corrects the Disciples' Reaction (19:10–12)
- R. Jesus Welcomes Children (19:13–15)
- S. A Question about Eternal Life (19:16–30)
 - 1. Jesus Corrects Confusion about Good Works and Eternal Life (19:16–22)
 - 2. Jesus Corrects Confusion about the Role of Rewards for Service (19:23–30)
- T. A Parable about Grace and Rewards (20:1–16)
- U. The Third Prediction of Jesus' Death (20:17–19)
- V. Jesus Corrects an Error regarding Greatness and Service (20:20–28)
- W. Transition: Healing Two Blind Men on the Way to Jerusalem (20:29–34)
- VII. Conflict and Teaching in Jerusalem (21:1–23:39)
 - A. The Entry into Jerusalem and Its Consequences (21:1–27)
 - 1. Riding into Jerusalem with Acclaim, on a Donkey (21:1–8)
 - 2. Jesus Praised as Son of David and Prophet (21:9–11)
 - 3. Cleansing and Judgment for the Temple (21:12–17)
 - 4. The Cursing of the Fig Tree (21:18–22)
 - 5. The Authority of Jesus Questioned (21:23–27)
 - B. Jesus Confronts Jewish Leaders through Parables (21:28–22:14)
 - 1. The Parable of the Two Sons (21:28–32)
 - 2. The Parable of the Wicked Tenant Farmers (21:33–46)
 - 3. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (22:1–14)
 - C. Jewish Leaders Question Jesus (22:15–46)
 - 1. Taxes for Caesar (22:15–22)
 - 2. Marriage in the Resurrection (22:23–33)
 - 3. The Greatest Commandment (22:34–40)
 - 4. The Son of David (22:41–45)
 - 5. Conclusion: The Questioners Silenced (22:46)
 - D. Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1–39)
 - 1. Warnings on the False Leadership of the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1–12)
 - 2. Seven Woes on the Scribes and Pharisees (23:13–36)
 - 3. Mourning Israel's Rebellion (23:37–39)
- VIII. The Fifth Discourse: Trouble, Perseverance, and the Eschaton (24:1–25:46)
 - A. The Context and the Questions (24:1–3)
 - B. Tribulations (24:4–14)
 - C. The Fall of Jerusalem (24:15–22)
 - D. False Christs (24:23–28)
 - E. The Coming of the Son of Man (24:29–31)

- F. Learning from the Fig Tree (24:32–35)
- G. Day and Hour Unknown (24:36–41)
 - 1. As in the Days of Noah (24:36–39)
 - 2. As with Workers Laboring Side by Side (24:40–41)
- H. Disciples Watch and Remain Prepared (24:42–25:46)
 - 1. Watching, for the Son Comes Like a Thief at Night (24:42–44)
 - 2. Prepared, for Servants Will Be Called to Account (24:45–51)
 - 3. Watching, for the Kingdom Is Like a Groom Delayed in Coming (25:1–13)
 - 4. Prepared by Faithful Use of Talents (25:14–30)
 - 5. Prepared to Render an Account before the Son of Man (25:31–46)
- IX. Death, and Resurrection (26:1–28:20)
 - A. Transition to the Conspiracy against Jesus (26:1–5)
 - B. Honored by Anointing in Bethany (26:6–13)
 - C. Rejected in Judas’s Plan for Betrayal (26:14–16)
 - D. The Lord’s Supper Established (26:17–30)
 - 1. Preparing for Passover (26:17–19)
 - 2. Foretelling of Judas’s Betrayal (26:20–25)
 - 3. Instituting the Lord’s Supper as a Sign (26:26–30)
 - E. Preparation for Final Events (26:31–46)
 - 1. Foretelling of Peter’s Betrayal (26:31–35)
 - 2. Praying in Gethsemane (26:36–46)
 - F. The Arrest of Jesus (26:47–56)
 - 1. Betrayed to Arrest with a Kiss (26:47–50)
 - 2. The Way of Violence Refused (26:51–56)
 - G. Interrogation by the Sanhedrin (26:57–68)
 - H. Betrayal by Peter (26:69–75)
 - I. Condemned by the Sanhedrin (27:1–2)
 - J. The Despair of Judas and the Calm of Jesus (27:3–14)
 - K. Events before Pilate (27:15–26)
 - 1. The Preference for Barabbas (27:15–21)
 - 2. The Call for Crucifixion (27:22–26)
 - L. The Abuse by Soldiers (27:27–31)
 - M. The Crucifixion and Mockery of Jesus (27:32–44)
 - N. The Death of Jesus and Its Results (27:45–56)
 - 1. Events Lead to Jesus’ Death and He Gives Up His Spirit (27:45–50)
 - 2. Events Following Jesus’ Death (27:51–53)
 - 3. Responses of the Centurion and the Women (27:54–56)
 - O. The Burial of Jesus (27:57–61)
 - P. The Guard for Jesus’ Tomb (27:62–66)
 - Q. The Resurrection of Jesus (28:1–10)
 - R. The False Report about Jesus (28:11–15)
 - S. The Commission Given by Jesus (28:16–20)

MATTHEW 1:1–17

1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, ^{1 4}and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ^{2 8}and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, ³and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹²And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, ⁴and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

¹Greek *Aram*; also verse 4 ²*Asaph* is probably an alternate spelling of *Asa*; some manuscripts *Asa*; also verse 8 ³*Amos* is probably an alternate spelling of *Amon*; some manuscripts *Amon*; twice in this verse

⁴Greek *Salathiel*; twice in this verse

Section Overview

Since Matthew seeks to equip the church to disciple the nations (28:18–20), he must establish the identity of Jesus, whom the nations must follow. Every passage contributes something to the portrait of Jesus' person and work; chapter 1 takes readers there from the start.³⁹ The question of Jesus' identity first arises in chapters 1–2. It continues during the first storm, as the disciples are forced to ask, "What

³⁹ The other Gospels do the same; cf. Mark 1:1; Luke 1:32, 35, 76–78; 2:11; John 1:1–4, 14.

sort of man is this?” (8:27). After the second storm, they answer, “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33). Later, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (16:13). Later still, the crowds themselves ask, “Who is this?” (21:10). Chapter 1 begins to present Jesus’ identity.

Section Outline

- I. The Origin, Birth, and Identity of Jesus (1:1–2:23)
 - A. The Genealogy of Jesus (1:1–17)

Matthew outlines Jesus’ genealogy for his readers. He begins with the title “the genealogy of Jesus Christ” (1:1) and ends with “Jesus . . . who is called Christ” (v. 16). Next, Matthew labels the genealogy as three sets of fourteen generations, from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to the birth of Christ (v. 17). The genealogies skip some people, notably Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah between Joram and Uzziah, and the format of three times fourteen works only if David, Jehoniah, or Christ is counted twice. So the genealogy is not exhaustive but has a symbolic dimension.

Comment

1:1–17 Scholars rightly call these verses Jesus’ genealogy, yet they are more than a list of forebears. Matthew underscores a leading point by stating it first and last: Jesus is the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Christ (vv. 1, 17). Ancient Greco-Roman biographies commonly began by establishing the lineage of their principal character, beginning with recent forebears. Old Testament narratives also establish the family lines of leaders. This shapes the reader’s sense of the identity of men like Abraham (Gen. 11:10–32) and David (Ruth 4:13–17).

Matthew’s genealogy serves the nearly universal human interest in social location. We see this also in Jesus’ public scenes, as people inform one another that he is from Nazareth (Matt. 21:11), the son of Joseph and Mary (Mark 6:3; John 1:45; 6:42), a carpenter (Matt. 13:55), and a man without formal education (John 7:15). In Western meritocracies, people inquire about education and job title. In traditional cultures, the interest may center on parentage and place of birth, but the questions are both common and sensible, and Matthew begins to answer them at once, even if his approach departs from the norms for Greco-Roman biographies.⁴⁰

Matthew’s genealogy is distinct in several ways. While typical Greco-Roman genealogies, and also Luke’s genealogy, begin with the hero’s father and work back to distant forebears, Matthew begins with David, then Abraham, before moving forward in time. By starting with David and Abraham, Matthew evokes their role in Israel’s history and reminds readers of the promises God had given them. By naming David, Matthew suggests that Jesus is the true David, the King who will restore Israel. God had promised to David, “I will establish the throne of [your offspring’s] kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13; cf. Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5). Matthew 28 ends

⁴⁰ David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 25–36.

with Jesus and the world, but Matthew 1 starts with Israel and with Abraham, the father of Israel and “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). Through him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1–3).⁴¹

Luke’s genealogy leads back to Adam, suggesting that Jesus is the hope of humanity. Matthew’s genealogy starts with David and Abraham and then stays with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in order to stress that the hope of mankind began with the history of Israel, fulfilled in Jesus.

Matthew jolts readers by including a quartet of women in his genealogy, contra the norms for genealogies of that era. The women share two threads: Gentile connections and flagrant sin. First is Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, Jacob’s son. In Genesis 38, she played the prostitute to gain an advantage over Judah and as a result became pregnant by him. Rahab comes second. A prostitute in Jericho, she hid Israel’s spies and helped them escape (Joshua 2). The third woman is Ruth, a Moabite widow and daughter-in-law of Naomi. She became a part of Israel when Boaz married her (Ruth 1–4). Fourth is Bathsheba, whom Matthew calls “the wife of Uriah.” She was David’s paramour and the mother of Solomon (2 Samuel 11–12).

Since Rahab and Ruth were both foreigners and Bathsheba at least married a Gentile (a Hittite), we see that Jesus’ line includes Gentiles. This reminds us that God always intended to bring Gentiles to himself. Further, since three of the four women were involved in sexual sin, the genealogy highlights the fact that Jesus came from a line of sinners. Once we see this, it is easy to enumerate the failings of Abraham, Isaac, and the rest.

After Judah, we barely know Jesus’ forebears until we reach Boaz, Obed, and Jesse (Matt. 1:3–6a). This trio indicates that God was faithful even during Israel’s nadir, the era of the judges (Judges 17–21; 1 Samuel 1–16). He preserved Israel in its rebellion and favored those who still walked in his ways (Ruth 1–4).

The more familiar kings make the same point in two ways (Matt. 1:6b–11). First, about half of the kings listed in the genealogy, sons of David all, were truly wicked. Ahaz worshiped Assyrian deities, practiced human sacrifice, and defiled the temple (2 Kings 16). Manasseh, incredibly, was worse. He did “more evil than the nations” God expelled from Canaan. He promoted idolatry and murdered the innocent (2 Kings 21:9–18). All in all, Kings and Chronicles parade a band of malefactors from Rehoboam to Jeconiah.

Second, with the exception of Josiah, even Israel’s noble kings committed great sins. David was notorious for his explosion of sin in 2 Samuel 11. Jehoshaphat allied himself with wicked men (2 Chronicles 18). Motivated by pride, Hezekiah foolishly showed his nation’s treasures to enemies who soon plundered them (2 Kings 20:12–18). After years of successful rule, Uzziah became proud and arrogated priestly privileges to himself (2 Chron. 26:1–21). Thus Jesus’ genealogy connects the Savior to the human race in all of its sinfulness.

The last segment of Jesus’ genealogy shows Israel suffering the consequences of her sin (Matt. 1:11–16). The borders of Israel failed to hold: Assyria conquered

41 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, COQG (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 385–386.

and scattered the northern kingdom, whereas Babylon conquered the south, deporting its leaders and reducing the remnant to vassalage. Jesus' subsequent ancestors lost their regal rank, and Joseph became a skilled but landless laborer. Yet Matthew's thrust is not simply that Israel declined. Rather, the shape of the genealogy asserts God's "covenantal faithfulness despite the chaos of historical events." The exile interrupts or intrudes upon an A-B-C-C-B-A structure—Jesus, David, Abraham, Abraham, David, [exile], Jesus—but the Lord still fulfills his purposes. Further, the structure of the genealogy marks the deportation as the end of the Davidic kingship, an end that Jesus reversed, thereby beginning the restoration of Israel.⁴²

Response

Matthew's genealogy reveals the people Jesus came to save: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, sinners suffering the effects of their rebellion. Matthew also begins to reveal the identity of the Savior through the names and titles mentioned in these verses, starting with "Jesus Christ" (1:1). "Jesus" means "the Lord saves" or "the Lord is salvation." As Matthew unfolds, we will see Jesus acting physically and materially (8:25–26; 9:21–22; 14:13–21) but not militarily. Principally, as the angel says in 1:21, "He will save his people from their sins." The title "Christ" means "anointed one," and indeed Jesus is one anointed for a task. As "son of David," Jesus is "king of the Jews" (1:1; 2:2). Psalm 130 declares, "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption" (Ps. 130:7). The remainder of Matthew tells this story.

MATTHEW 1:18–25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ¹ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed² to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

⁴² Nicholas G. Piotrowski, "After the Deportation": Observations in Matthew's Apocalyptic Genealogy," *BBR* 25/2 (2015): 193–198.

(which means, God with us).²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

¹ Some manuscripts *of the Christ* ² That is, legally pledged to be married

Section Overview

Because they doubt the supernatural, skeptics question the virgin birth. Wags say, “I believe everything Paul and John say about the virgin birth: nothing.” Indeed, Matthew and Luke present the only accounts of Jesus’ conception and birth. The texts are divergent but complementary. Both affirm that it is the Spirit, not Joseph, who plants life in Mary’s womb (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35). Both assert Mary’s virginity (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:34). Luke recounts events from Mary’s perspective; Matthew from Joseph’s. Luke invites readers to consider a virgin, holy and yielded to God, astonished to hear that God incarnate will become her baby. Matthew presents a holy man, startled to find that his betrothed is pregnant, but by no man.⁴³ Among the differences between Matthew and Luke, we notice the names given to Jesus. Both Gospels call Jesus God’s Son (Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:38). In Matthew 1 he is Jesus, Immanuel, and son of David. Through Joseph, Jesus is also reckoned a son of David, from whose line the deliverer of Israel must come.

Section Outline

- I. The Origin, Birth, and Identity of Jesus (1:1–2:23) . . .
 - B. The Origin of Jesus (1:18–25)

Matthew 1:1–17 established Jesus’ lineage. Verses 18–25 describes his conception, birth, and names, along with their significance. Matthew’s account focuses not on Jesus’ birth per se but on his conception and on Joseph’s experience of the news. Before Mary knows a man, but after her betrothal, the Holy Spirit implants life in her (v. 18). Joseph reacts to Mary’s pregnancy by planning to separate from her (v. 19), but an angel assures Joseph of Mary’s purity (v. 20). The angel then commands Joseph to name the child Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (v. 21). The birth also fulfills Isaiah’s promise of a child, born of a virgin and named “Immanuel,” for he is “God with us” (vv. 22–23). Joseph obeys the angel at each point. He takes Mary as his wife but does not “know” her until she gives birth (vv. 24–25).

Comment

1:18–25 Matthew’s account describes more than a birth. The word translated “birth” in verse 18 could be translated “origin,” since Matthew’s account of the

⁴³ The virgin birth became a symbol of the contest between orthodox and modernist, supernatural and antinatural forms of Christianity. At the height of that contest, the virgin birth became a “fundamental.” In 1910, James Orr wrote “The Virgin Birth of Christ” as the first article in the series *The Fundamentals*. In 1924, J. Gresham Machen defended it in a learned monograph, *The Virgin Birth* (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1965). The virgin birth has a small footprint in the NT corpus, yet much depends upon it, including the deity, sinlessness, and atonement of Christ. The virgin birth is essential to Jesus’ identity, which is a constant interest of Matthew.

incarnation stresses the virgin *conception* of Jesus more than his birth (v. 18). The church traditionally speaks of a virgin birth, but the Gospels stress Jesus' miraculous conception. Matthew does not say the birth itself is unusual.⁴⁴ He does say the Spirit places life in Mary's womb (v. 18).

Mary and Joseph are betrothed when Matthew's narrative begins. Joseph has not known Mary, so when she is "found to be with child," it seems to Joseph that Mary has betrayed him. This gives him the right to end the betrothal, which is so binding that Matthew calls Joseph "her husband," and the termination would amount to a divorce (vv. 18–19). Because Joseph is just, he will not marry an apparently immoral woman. R. T. France explains that "just" means most basically "law-abiding" in that culture; the law was understood to *require* the termination of an engagement in cases of adultery.⁴⁵ Because he is also merciful, Joseph plans to divorce her "quietly" instead of exposing her to public disgrace (v. 19).

God dispatches an angel to redirect Joseph. Using a dream (see also 2:12, 13, 19, 22), the angel calls him "Joseph, son of David." Israel had endured a string of evil and feckless kings before collapsing and having no king for centuries. By Joseph's day, David's line is exhausted, nearly invisible. Jesus' birth reignites hope, for he is from the *line* of David, but not the *flesh* of David. Ordinary flesh cannot save. God must and does, by renewing the kingly line himself, through his sinless Son.

"Son of David" links the virgin conception to the Davidic genealogy and Joseph's place in it. He should "not fear to take Mary" as his wife (1:20), because her child has been conceived not by a man but by God's Spirit. Since she is faithful, divorce is precluded. Because Joseph will adopt him, Jesus will grow up with godly parents.

The Lord often uses names to reveal his purposes (cf. Gen. 17:1–7; 32:22–28), and does so here. God chooses Jesus' names, fulfills prophecies, and orchestrates everything. Joseph must name the infant Jesus, meaning "Yahweh saves," because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The rest of Matthew explains how this salvation will occur.

God also ensures the fulfillment of Isaiah 7, where the prophet declared that a "virgin shall conceive . . . and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Matt. 1:22–23). Moreover, everything "took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by," or "through," the prophet (v. 22). That is, Isaiah spoke as God directed (2 Pet. 1:21) so that Isaiah's words were both his words and God's as they prepared the way for his salvation.

The incarnation declares that God is with us. The prototype of the Immanuel principle occurred during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah. Early in Ahaz's reign, two adjacent kings, Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Aram, marched on Jerusalem, and Ahaz and the people shook with fear (Isa. 7:1–2). Although Ahaz was unfaithful, God sent Isaiah to declare that the invasion would fail. Since Isaiah knew Ahaz's mind, Isaiah offered him a sign of God's deliverance (Isa. 7:3–11). But Ahaz wanted

⁴⁴ The hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" includes the line "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given," which can be construed to imply that the birth process was unusually calm, but this has no biblical basis.

⁴⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 51.

no sign from God. He had his own plan—an appeal to mighty Assyria—and wanted no divine aid. Unwilling to admit this, Ahaz feigned piety, saying, “I will not put the LORD to the test” (Isa. 7:12). Indeed, no one should test God, but Isaiah saw through the subterfuge. He told Ahaz that he would receive a sign whether he liked it or not. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). Before this child knew right from wrong, the kings attacking Ahaz would be destroyed by Assyria, but afterward Assyria would sweep over Israel, out of control (Isa. 7:16–19; 8:4–8). Ahaz had a choice. The Immanuel principle would hold either way: if Ahaz rejected God’s presence to bless, God would still be present to curse. The Lord is always Immanuel. He offers deliverance, but if any reject him, he brings woe.

When the angel finishes speaking, Joseph wakes, believes, and obeys. He takes Mary as his wife (Matt. 1:24). Thus Joseph, like Mary, becomes God’s servant. To highlight the supernatural conception of Jesus, Matthew says that Joseph does not “know” Mary sexually until she gives birth. The “until” implies that they have normal marital intimacy afterward. Finally, Joseph names his son “Jesus,” as the angel had commanded (v. 25).

Response

Matthew 1:18–25 is a paradigmatic case of divine action calling forth faithful human response. The Lord initiates our redemption by creating life in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus the Father spares Jesus the corruption of sin and prepares him to become the one who will save “his people from their sins” (v. 21). The name Jesus (“Yahweh saves”) teaches that we cannot save ourselves, that ordinary flesh cannot save. God saves, and he inaugurates that salvation at the birth of Jesus. Jesus’ very name suggests that sin is humanity’s core problem. Calamity comes from accidents, disease, natural disaster, and more, but sin is the ultimate source of trouble. Humanity’s greatest disaster is to lose fellowship with God. Jesus came to rescue his people from that state.

Jesus is also Immanuel. Like Ahaz, we must know that the Lord is Immanuel, present to bless or to curse, whether we like it or not. He offers deliverance, but if any reject him, he brings woe. God offered Ahaz a *sign* of Immanuel, God with us, but Jesus *is* God with us. Ahaz represents all who are indifferent to God’s presence. Some may be pleased that Christians find comfort in such myths. But Immanuel is not a religious *experience*; he is the truth, whether received or not. The church focuses on Immanuel when it remembers Jesus’ life in the flesh. Jesus is still God with us, by the Spirit’s indwelling us. God is with us. If we believe, he is with us to bless and to save. If not, God is still with us, to call us to repentance or, failing that, to judge.

God is *always* with us (Ps. 139:7–9). One can ignore, deny, even curse God, but he never *disappears*. Nevertheless, with Jesus’ birth, God draws near to humanity in a new way. Matthew accents this at essential moments at the beginning, midpoint, and end of his Gospel. In the incarnation, we learn *Jesus is Immanuel*, God with us, to save (Matt. 1:21). At the midpoint, Jesus is with us in church discipline, which

preserves the church's purity and unity (18:20). And before he ascends, Jesus commands the apostles to disciple the nations, promising power for the task, declaring, "I am with you always" (28:20).

We can see exemplary faith in Joseph's faithfulness. He controls the natural impulse to protect his honor. He also takes his place in the history of redemption as Jesus' human father. Because of this faith, he knows the Lord as Immanuel and Savior. By faith, all who accept Matthew's good news know Jesus in the same way.

MATTHEW 2:1–12

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men¹ from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose² and have come to worship him." ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

¹Greek *magi*; also verses 7, 16 ²Or *in the east*; also verse 9

Section Overview

After Matthew 1 describes Jesus' birth, Matthew 2 recounts the manifold human response to it, including Herod's murderous hostility. When God thwarts Herod, it shows that the wrath of human kings cannot thwart the purposes of God the King.

Skeptics doubt that a star with supernatural origin could have led anyone to Jesus. They dismiss the story as legend, citing parallels to pagan myths in which stars guided heroes to their destination.⁴⁶ In ancient literature, astrological phenomena also accompanied the birth or death of notable kings, including both Julius Caesar (death) and Augustus Caesar (birth).⁴⁷ Skeptics therefore propose that Matthew fabricated this episode or perhaps adapted a legend. If Matthew's sources misled him, he was deceived. If he invented this episode, he was a deceiver. But why would Matthew concoct a story of worshiping astrologers for a predominantly Jewish audience? Roughly like gambling today, astrology was a plague, denounced by prophets and ethicists alike. But if God chose to summon Gentiles by speaking their language, then Matthew could put that fact to use, since it matched his themes.

Magi, or “wise men,” were royal counselors. At best, they were learned and prudent. At worst, they were charlatans, sycophants, and brutes (cf. Dan. 2:1–10; Acts 8:9–24).⁴⁸ Whatever their character, the line between astrology and astronomy was thin, if only because stargazing was respectable. Scripture both prohibits and mocks astrology (Jer. 8:2; 19:13; Isa. 47:13–15), yet God reversed expectations and spoke to stargazers in language they understood, thereby calling Gentiles to Jesus.

Popular Christian images of the magi clash with Matthew's account. The magi were counselors, not kings, and while they bore three gifts, their number (unstated) was large enough to cause a stir in Jerusalem (Matt. 2:3). Contrary to nativity scenes, they found Jesus in a house, not a manger (v. 11).

Matthew 2 introduces themes that later chapters will develop. First, while pagans worship Jesus, Israel's political leaders seek his death while her religious leaders despise him (8:5–13; 12:24; 26:3–5). Second, Jesus fulfills the promise that the nations would come to the light of the Messiah (Isa. 60:3). Third, Matthew 2 demonstrates God's providential and supernatural care for his Son in the face of groundless hostility.

Section Outline

- I. The Origin, Birth, and Identity of Jesus (1:1–2:23) . . .
 - C. The Visit of the Magi (2:1–12)

Matthew 2:1–12 is a narrative that leads with the main event, the arrival of the wise men announcing the birth of the king of the Jews. The response to the message is dismal. Herod is troubled, as is “all Jerusalem.” The chief priests and scribes can quote the relevant texts about the event but seem indifferent (vv. 1–6). The narrative moves again as Herod, by duping the Wise Men, charts a path to the child's murder (vv. 7–10). After the magi deliver their gifts, God thwarts Herod's plan.

⁴⁶ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 99.

⁴⁷ Suetonius, *The Deified Julius* 88; *The Deified Augustus* 94.

⁴⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 167–178, 197–200.

Comment

2:1–12 Matthew stresses God’s mission to the Gentiles (1:5–6; 4:15; 8:10–12; 15:21–27; 28:18–20), beginning with the men who travel so far, at great risk and cost, to pay homage to the one “born king of the Jews” (2:2). They expect to find the future king in a palace. But no son has been born to Herod, so he takes the announcement of a new king as a threat and thus is “troubled” (v. 3). This fits Herod’s character. As a ruler, Herod was talented and vigorous, but also violent and paranoid enough to kill several of his sons as well as his favorite wife. His desire to kill Jesus coheres with his pattern of eliminating all threats. If Herod, cruel and violent, is “troubled,” it is no surprise that Jerusalem is too, although one might have hoped for more of a populace awaiting its Messiah.

Herod consults rival groups of experts and inquires closely as he asks “where the Christ was to be born” (v. 4). “Inquired” is in the imperfect tense in Greek, implying that Herod questions them repeatedly.⁴⁹ Given that the “scribes” were conservative teachers and (typically) Pharisees, while the “chief priests” who rested atop the temple hierarchy were Sadducees who collaborated with Rome, we see that Herod chooses to consult antagonistic groups regarding the birth of Messiah. When they agree, Herod knows he can trust their answer. Citing Micah 5:2, they reply, “In Bethlehem of Judea.” They also add the essential line, “From you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel,” as well as a perfect citation formula, “for so it is written by the prophet.” “It is written” signifies that this is God’s abiding word. “By the prophet” acknowledges the prophet as God’s agent. So they know the answer and face no more than a 5 mile (8 km) journey, yet, reading Matthew, we see none of them traveling to see Jesus.

Once Herod knows where the child is, he plans his murder. He questions the wise men, gains their confidence, and feigns a desire to join them in worship after they identify and locate the child. The magi believe him, but God’s plans supersede Herod’s.

One can understand Herod’s fear. The belief in astrological signs is widespread, so he reacts to the magi. Besides, Herod is an Idumean, not a proper Jew, and because he is both a tyrant and a usurper (having taken the kingship by force and intrigue), he knows he has few friends. Yet, like many fears, his is also irrational. If Jesus is indeed the God-ordained ruler of Israel, why would he dream that he could kill him? And if the wise men were wrong, why would he try to kill a harmless child? Herod is cunning, but his sin makes him a fool.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, as the Jews stay home, the Gentiles head to Bethlehem, and the star eventually “came to rest over the place where the child was” (Matt. 2:9). They find the house, “saw the child with Mary his mother, and . . . fell down and worshiped him” (v. 11). We observe that the magi worship *him*, not *them*—that is, not Jesus and the holy family or Jesus and Mary. Mary is not, as some say, a member of the

⁴⁹ Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1965), 27.

⁵⁰ Herod ordered hundreds of Jewish leaders to be slain when he died so that there would be mourning at his death. The command was ignored, but its cruelty increases his infamy.

“Christian pantheon.” But do the magi fully comprehend Jesus’ identity? Do they fall in worship before the one they know to be God incarnate?

There is no indisputable case of Jesus’ receiving worship in the fullest sense prior to his resurrection.⁵¹ We should not leap to conclusions when reading that someone calls Jesus “Lord” or falls, bows, or even worships. “Worship” in verse 11, and elsewhere in the ESV, translates *proskyneō*, which the standard Greek lexicon defines this way: “To express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, (*fall down and*) *worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully*” (BDAG, italics theirs). Thus, bowing can signify respect, homage, or worship, depending on the context.

The Gospels suggest that people pay Jesus homage that transcends respect. The needy and the demon possessed often fall (*proskyneō* or *piptō*) before Jesus, and he never tells them to get up (Matt. 8:2; 9:18; Mark 5:33). We cannot, however, call each instance an act of worship. Demons fall before Jesus (Mark 3:11; 5:6), but they do not worship him. Neither does the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17) or the mocking soldiers (Mark 15:19). We cannot be certain that the Syrophenician woman falls in worship more than in need (Matt. 15:25). Falling to one’s knees or face is certainly worship in Revelation (1:17; 5:8, 14; 19:10; 22:8). In Matthew, falling is an act of worship at the transfiguration (17:6), after the resurrection (28:9; cf. Luke 24:52), and perhaps with the magi (Matt. 2:11).

It may not be worship every time supplicants fall before Jesus, but surely some come in something akin to a spirit of worship. The case of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11–19 illustrates this truth. Just one of the ten, a Samaritan, returns to thank Jesus, and he “turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.” Instead of telling the man to get up, Jesus asks, “Where are the nine?” So the leper prostrates himself before Christ, taking the position and using the terms of a worshiper. A moment later Jesus says, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well” (Luke 17:15–19). In the NT neither men nor angels can bear to see a fellow creature bowing to them in homage (Acts 14:8–15; Rev. 22:8–9). But Jesus allows the leper—and others on other occasions—to remain at his feet while they praise God. So Jesus implicitly claims deity, and they implicitly worship, or come close to it. That is, in the NT no one successfully falls (*piptō*) or bows (*proskyneō*) to anyone but Jesus.⁵² If the magi do not know enough to worship in the fullest sense, they at least move in that direction, as the statement of their homage suggests (Matt. 2:2, 11).

In that spirit, the wise men joyfully offer heady gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.⁵³ It is too much to think that they infuse each gift with symbolic weight (such as myrrh for burial). Rather, gift giving was essential in that culture,

51 R. T. France, “The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate,” in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 26.

52 Unless one counts the parable of the unforgiving servant, in which two servants fall down in homage (Matt. 18:26, 29).

53 Joy is the right response to the king and his kingdom; cf. Matthew 5:12; 13:44; 28:8.

especially when approaching a leader. Frankincense, gold, and myrrh were costly, the sort of precious thing found in one royal court and given in another. (Joseph and Mary possibly sold them to finance their journey to Egypt.) If there is symbolism in the gifts, it lies in the allusion to Psalm 72 and its prophecy that the nations would come to a king greater than Solomon, bringing gifts and falling before him as “all nations serve him” (Ps. 72:10–11).⁵⁴

Cultural norms required reciprocal gifts. The magi, as representatives of the nations, go home empty handed, but Jesus more than repays them in the end. As they leave, God warns them by a dream “not to return to Herod, [and] they departed to their own country by another way” (Matt. 2:12). Once Herod realizes he has been duped, he seeks to kill Jesus another way (v. 16).

Response

Matthew 2:1–12 presents a fourfold response to the announcement of the birth of Jesus, King of the Jews. These responses constitute the prototypes of possible responses to God’s actions through all ages. Matthew’s readers must discern and adopt the best response to Jesus.

The anger and paranoia of Herod, foe of God and agent of Satan, is obvious. He hopes to save himself and his imagined supremacy by slaying the true King. He epitomizes humanity’s desire for self-determination and Satan’s hatred of God and his work. Herod represents all who are hostile to God.

Matthew barely mentions the people of Jerusalem, but they follow Herod. If he is troubled, they too are troubled, although for different reasons. They know Herod’s ways, but their response to the birth of this King is pathetic; they are “troubled,” nothing more. They represent all who have scant interest in Jesus but wonder if he might somehow cause them trouble.

This is tragic, since the people were awaiting their Messiah, and the magi’s message fit known prophecies. Isaiah predicted, “Nations shall come to your light,” and the magi, from distant nations, followed a light to Jesus (Isa. 60:3). Jeremiah said that the Messiah would be a righteous king, and the magi sought a king (Jer. 23:5–6). Numbers 24:17 foresaw that “a star shall come out of Jacob,” and the magi followed a star. So the people had reason to heed the wise men, but they did not do so.

The priests and scribes are apathetic—informed but inert. They offer the correct answer, and then disappear from the narrative. They neither rejoice nor join the magi in Bethlehem. They expect a messiah. They hear a report that matches prophecies *that they know*, and yet they do nothing. These leaders foreshadow subsequent priests and scribes, who are hostile, not merely indifferent. Jesus will compare them to Nineveh, which repented at Jonah’s proclamation of judgment. Meanwhile, Israel’s leaders are unmoved by word of their long-expected deliverer. They represent all who know the faith but do nothing.

⁵⁴ Cf. Isaiah 60:1–5, in which the nations stream to Israel’s light. The hope for glory, the NT shows, is concentrated upon and fulfilled in Jesus.

The magi know far less, but they act on what they know, as disciples should. They sacrifice time, treasure, and safety to find the King and offer him the best gifts they have. They represent all who know and put their knowledge to practice.

Readers must therefore choose whether to join the pagans and outsiders who adore Jesus or the elite who scorn him. Yet God acts before and after all human choices. He sends the Redeemer, and when Herod plans harm, the Lord protects him.

MATTHEW 2:13–23

¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

¹⁹But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” ²¹And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Section Overview

The naive reader’s mind boggles at the thought of a king murdering all the male children in a town so close to the capital. The cruelty seems unthinkable, and in an age when the media report atrocities almost immediately, readers might think no king could act that way. But Herod reigned in different times, and his murder