Matthew’s Theological Story

Matthew’s theological story of Jesus is very close to that of Mark. He incorporates the vast majority of the individual story items in Mark. He keeps broadly to the same order in his narrative as in Mark, although there is a complex rearrangement of the material in the earlier chapters. He also sticks fairly closely to Mark’s wording, although his tendency here is to abbreviate the accounts to some extent. The total impact of the material in parallel with Mark in his narrative is thus very much the same as it is in Mark, although the amount of additional material does cause us to see it in a different context, and there are numerous small changes and additions that affect our understanding of it. Ideally, a proper treatment of the theological story of Matthew and likewise of Luke should cover the whole account in the same way and with the same detail as in the case of Mark, but this would take up a considerable amount of space and also inevitably entail a lot of repetition of their common emphases. Practically, the way forward will be to note the similarities and differences by comparison with Mark.

The basic structure of the Gospel is much the same as in Mark. It is noteworthy that Matthew uses the same form of words, “From that time on Jesus began to” in Matthew 4:17 and Matthew 16:21, and that scholars hold that while this is possible, the arguments remain inconclusive.


1 There is fairly broad agreement that the Gospel is to be dated after Mark. The general tendency is to argue that its authorship is unknown, although it may contain material ultimately stemming from Matthew, the disciple of Jesus. A strong case for authorship of the Gospel by Matthew is offered by R. T. France, Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), pp. 50–80, but most
this formula occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ proclamation of the message of the kingdom\(^2\) and at the point where he begins to teach his disciples about his imminent death. This suggests that Matthew shares the same basic theological two-part structure that Mark has in his Gospel, where the first part reveals who Jesus is and the second explains that he must suffer.\(^3\) Another structure, however, is imposed on top of this one. This is a narrative structure that gives an alternation of action and discourse.\(^4\)

**The birth, baptism and temptation of Jesus.** Matthew differs from Mark in providing a lengthy preface to the Gospel by the inclusion of the story of the birth of Jesus (Mt 1–2). This account contains two elements. It commences with a genealogical tree for Jesus, which begins with Abraham and traces the line that leads to the kings of Judah and on to Zerubbabel, and then through a series of otherwise unknown names until we reach Joseph, the husband of Jesus’ mother, Mary. On the way through, four women are mentioned (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba) who had irregular unions or were non-Jews. The effect of the genealogy is to root Jesus in the Jewish people and in its royal line, and to prepare the way for his irregular birth and for the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God.\(^5\)

Then Matthew relates that Mary was found to be with child and that it was revealed to Joseph in a dream that this had come about by the Holy Spirit, with the clearly intended implication that Mary had not committed adultery or fornication with any other man. The child would be named Jesus, meaning “the Lord saves”, and his birth would fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of a child of a virgin to be called Immanuel, meaning “God [is] with us”. At the outset, therefore, Jesus is placed in the royal line of Judah, which strongly suggests that he is the Messiah, his role has to do with saving people from sin, and his presence is

\(^2\) Instead of “kingdom of God” Matthew has the alternative form “kingdom of heaven” in nearly every case. This appears to be nothing more than a stylistic variant reflecting perhaps Jewish usage, although the phrase is not attested in Judaism before Johanan ben Zakkai; see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:390–91.

\(^3\) The theme of the rejection of Jesus is not absent from the first part of the Gospel (e.g., Mt 12:40), but it is not presented as explicitly as in the second part.

\(^4\) The precise details of this structure, which are a matter of some debate, are not of essential importance for a study of the theology of Matthew.

\(^5\) For Matthew, as for Luke, it is assumed that Joseph’s acceptance of Jesus as if he were his own son legally entitled him to belong to this genealogy and so to be accounted as a descendant of David.


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tantamount to that of God himself. This royal element is continued in the ensuing account of the birth and its aftermath, where the magi understand the child to be the king of the Jews, and Herod assumes that this is the “Christ”. The motif that Jesus is the Son of God emerges almost incidentally in the story of the flight to Egypt with its “fulfillment” of Hosea 11:1. The rest of Jesus’ childhood and youth is passed over without comment.

Matthew is now ready to pick up the story of the adult life of Jesus at the same point where Mark begins, namely, with the activity of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism by him (Mt 3). The account illustrates well how Matthew works on his story. First, by including material from his other sources, such as the fuller account of the preaching of John (Mt 3:7–10, 14–15), he puts a greater stress on the judgment that awaits those who do not repent of their sins and voices a certain skepticism about the intentions of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism, both of which are themes that will recur. Second, he makes slight changes in the account given by Mark, such as the substitution of “This is my beloved son” for “You are my beloved son”, which has the effect of turning a saying addressed primarily to Jesus in Mark into a public proclamation.

Similarly, Mark’s very brief note that Jesus was tempted by Satan is replaced by a lengthier account of three attempts by the devil to tempt Jesus to disobey and distrust God (Mt 4:1–11). The resolute resistance and triumph of Jesus emerge more clearly in this alternative account.

The manifesto of the teacher. The preliminaries over, Matthew takes up the story of the work of Jesus in Galilee (Mt 4:12–25). Here, as earlier in the story of his birth, Matthew sees some kind of fulfillment of prophecy in the Old Testament and cites appropriate passages, usually with a specific formula that says that what happened took place in order to fulfill the prophecy. The effect of these citations is to show in some detail that significant events and activities in the life of Jesus correspond with Old Testament prophecies and types. The message of Jesus is summarized even more briefly than in Mark as “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4:17). The element of fulfillment in Mark’s account of the message is contained in the preceding scriptural quotation from Isaiah 9:1–2. The command that identifies the message as good news (“gospel”) and calls for belief in it is dropped but is effectively present in the following summary account of the mission of Jesus “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing” (Mt 4:23).


The same message is attributed to John the Baptist in Mt 3:2.


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Whereas Mark goes straight on into a set of episodes that would fill out this summary and that lead fairly quickly into the conflict raised by Jesus’ teaching and healings, Matthew now places well up front the first of the five lengthy accounts of the teaching of Jesus that are so characteristic of this Gospel. By so doing he emphasizes that Jesus is a teacher who is at the same time a healer rather than vice versa. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) is a carefully structured piece, extending to ninety-eight verses; it corresponds with a much briefer account in Luke 6:20–49 that runs to only thirty verses, although some of Matthew’s material in his sermon is paralleled elsewhere in Luke. This procedure indicates the importance to Matthew of presenting the teaching of Jesus at length and in a reasonably systematic kind of way. As we saw, there is something similar in Mark 4 and Mark 13, but Matthew has gone much further in this respect.

The material is addressed to a group that comprises the crowds and the disciples of Jesus, the former term indicating those as yet uncommitted to him and his message, while the latter are those who have some kind of commitment, including some whose commitment may be very partial or nominal. It is striking, then, that the teaching is essentially for the followers8 in that it includes the promises of Jesus to those who follow him but majors on the kind of conduct that is required by God of those who respond to the message of the kingdom of God. This is teaching for disciples, which at the same time is a summons to those not yet committed to Jesus and a glimpse into what they are letting themselves in for. In this way Matthew focuses on the kind of behavior that should be characteristic of disciples. Although Matthew is not lacking in material about the gracious, saving action of God, this sermon is a full-scale account of what is involved in repentance, a new way of life for those who respond to the message of Jesus.

Although the sermon is concerned with behavior rather than belief, nevertheless it makes theological assumptions and has theological implications. These must be briefly noted.

1. The kingdom of heaven is possessed by those who are poor in spirit and are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Mt 5:3, 10). This means that they enjoy the benefits that are associated with the reign of God. Yet the other Beatitudes spelling out the promises in detail are in the future tense (Mt 5:4–9, 11–12). This recognizes the realities of the situation that the promises are not yet completely fulfilled but will be in the future. Nevertheless, the kingdom assuredly belongs here and now to the poor in spirit and there is certainly some sense in which it is already present and its blessings are

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8 For example, Mt 5:13–16 can only be addressed to them.


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already real (Mt 12:28).

2. Jesus asserts that the law and the prophets are not abolished but fulfilled by him and emphasizes the need for the practice and teaching of the least commandments in the context of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:17–20). He then proceeds to go through a number of commandments, all taken from the law, and gives teaching that takes them on to a higher level; if some of them are made redundant (e.g., Mt 5:38–39), the redundant command still remains in force as a kind of safety net. These examples are not of “least” commandments.9 It is clear that for Jesus, as understood by Matthew, the law remains in force for his Jewish audience, but in the light of the antithetical teaching that follows it is the law as reinterpreted by Jesus that is now to be kept.

3. Jesus emphasizes the goodness of God as the heavenly Father and his care (Mt 6:8, 25–34). The teaching about his providential care is given in the context of encouragement for the disciples to trust in him. This fits in with the consistent teaching of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels according to which the relationship of God as Father is always with those who are disciples and not with people in general. Jesus never speaks of God as Father except to his disciples. The relationship is spiritual rather than being based on creation.

4. The goodness of God is seen in the way that he answers prayer and gives good gifts to his children (Mt 7:11). Here Matthew’s version differs from that of Luke, according to which God will give the Spirit to those who ask him (Lk 11:13). It is unlikely that Matthew has changed an originally spiritual gift into one that is not so, and more probable that he has a more general expression that is primarily spiritual but does not exclude other kinds of answers to prayer.

5. The end of the sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience to the words of Jesus and to the will of God. Implicit here is the equation of the sayings of Jesus with the will of God, but the key point is that the Christian life is a matter of obedience and not just of faith. The sermon, accordingly, places together total faith in the goodness of God who answers prayer and total obedience to his will, which does not relax the commandments but rather lifts them to a higher plane of fulfillment that goes beyond simply obeying the letter of the law.

The sermon, then, expands the message that invites people to repent, and it does so by exhibiting the promises and the demands given to those who have accepted the mes-

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9 One might suppose that the term least is introduced with “commandments” in order to allow the play on words with “least in the kingdom of heaven” and is not to be taken too strictly.


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sage of the kingdom. In short, what an ongo-
ing conversion to the way of Jesus entails is set in the context of God’s fatherly care for disciples.

The mission of Jesus—and his disci-
ues. After this manifesto Matthew basically uses the next two chapters of the Gospel (Mt 8–9) to cover some of the stories of Jesus’ activity that we find in the early chapters of Mark (Mk 1–5) but without adhering too closely to Mark’s order. Where Mark has used some of this material to illustrate the build-up of opposition to Jesus (Mk 2:1–3:6), Matthew appears to be less interested in this motif (but cf. Mt 9:34), and the stress is rather on the remarkable character of Jesus as healer, in accordance with prophecy (Mt 8:17), on his calls to discipleship and on his growing reputation. This comes to a climax at the end of Matthew 9, where the work is becoming too great for one person to accomplish. At this point, therefore, we hear that Jesus has appointed twelve disciples and now sends them out to extend his mission.

This sending is the occasion for the sec-
ond main teaching section in the Gospel (Mt 10:5–11:1), which is concerned with instruc-
tions, warnings and encouragements for those engaged in mission. Although the teaching begins with material directly relevant to the mission of the Twelve there and then (Mt 10:5–15),\(^\text{10}\) it becomes the locus in

Matthew’s systematic presentation of Jesus’ teaching for bringing in other material that was more relevant to the disciples in the post-
Easter situation (Mt 10:16–42).

The most remarkable features in the dis-
course are two verses peculiar to Matthew. In Matthew 10:5–6 the disciples are instructed not to go the Gentiles or to the Samaritans but to the lost sheep of Israel. The need for this command arises out of the realities of the geography: Galilee was heavily populated with Gentiles and was adja-
cent to Samaria, through which people would travel to Jerusalem. Theologically the mission has as its priority Israel and specifically the needy people in it (the marginal-
ized and the poor). All the evidence points to the fact that the historical Jesus did focus his mission on the Jews, as the embarrassing incident in Mt 15:21–28 (note Mt 15:24 par. Mk 7:24–30) indicates. At the same time, there is an openness to Gentiles throughout the Gospel that indicates that for Matthew this limitation was confined to the mission of Jesus and was not binding on the early church. Consequently, although this chapter brings together teaching relevant for disci-
bles on mission, the horizon at this point remains basically that of the lifetime of Jesus.

But the horizon is fuzzy. The thought of persecution in the Gentile world arises in Matthew 10:18–20, where Matthew has incorporated material from Mark 13. Then we have the puzzle of a second verse pecu-

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\(^{10}\) Matthew here follows the teaching in Mk 6 together with parallel material from Q.

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familiar to Matthew (Mt 10:23), where the disciples are told that they will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. This saying appears to refer to the future coming of the Son of Man that is attested elsewhere in the Gospels and states that the task facing the disciples to Israel is too great to be completed before this final event; it would presumably envisage a mission that extends beyond the time of Jesus, and the Evangelists have no difficulties about Jesus being able to foretell events after his death. The statement would appear to be placed within the context of ongoing mission, and not of the immediate short-term mission of the disciples. This is certainly an odd statement in that the number of cities of Israel was not all that many, unless we are meant to include the many cities in the Diaspora where Jews lived. It is also odd in that, if it refers to the postresurrection period, it retains the restriction to Jewish cities. The best explanation is that of W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., who hold that Matthew saw in this saying a prophecy of the parousia of the Son of Man that would occur before the disciples had concluded their mission to the world, including Israel. The saying is intended to be encouragement to those who experience persecution while on mission, and it reassures them that the Son of Man will come while they are still engaged on their task.12

The growth of opposition and division. The next section is also devoted to the activities of Jesus, principally to his teaching and the varied reactions to it (Mt 11–12). It contains Q material that is concerned with Jesus’ relationship to John the Baptist and the contrast between the rejection that he found in the cities of Galilee and the acceptance of God’s message by the disciples. Then it picks up the material in Mark 2–3 that was passed over earlier in the Gospel, supplementing it with Q material. In this section the opposition from the Pharisees, culminating in a murderous plot, is thematic.

Within this section it is noteworthy that the Evangelist now calls Jesus the “Christ” (Mt 11:2), thereby implicitly answering affirmatively the question of John the Baptist, “Are you the one who was to come?” Jesus’ answer to the question refers to his mighty works and sees them as fulfilling what was prophesied in Isaiah 35 concerning the future era when God comes.13 In a

12 There is a minor inconsistency with Mt 24:14 (cf. Mk 13:10), which states that the gospel must “first” be preached to all nations. The inconsistency is resolved to some extent if “all nations” is not interpreted to mean “every single community”.

13 The reference to Is 35 and other associated texts is implicit; there is no formal quotation. The significant point is that what is prophesied there when God comes (Is 35:4) is understood to be fulfilled in the Messiah’s coming. Hence Jesus is


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difficult saying a contrast is drawn between the previous era of the prophets and the law and the new era in which the kingdom of heaven is active (Mt 11:12–13). John is identified clearly as the latter-day Elijah of Malachi 4:5–6.

The nature of God’s work through Jesus is illumined in the important saying in which Jesus comments on the way in which God as Father reveals himself through the Son to those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him and then issues a general invitation to all who are burdened to come to him (Mt 11:25–30). This saying is significant for christology and for soteriology. As it stands, it clearly identifies Jesus as the Son, standing in the kind of exclusive, close relationship to the Father that is much more fully developed in the Gospel of John. It also indicates indeed Immanuel.

14 The saying is ambiguous, and scholarly opinions differ as to whether the kingdom “has been forcefully advancing” (NIV) or “has been subjected to violence” (TNIV text; cf. NRSV text) and whether the “violent people” are straining to enter it (so apparently NIV) or to oppose it (TNIV; NRSV). The current trend is to accept the latter options; see, for example, Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 1–13 (Dallas: Word, 1993), pp. 306–7. Either way, the kingdom is clearly active.

15 The relationship of the saying to the teaching of the historical Jesus is disputed. For a defense of its authenticity see Ben Witherington III, The Christology of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 221–28.

The third discourse section of the Gospel (Mt 13) comes appropriately at this point as an extended comment on the way in which people respond, or fail to respond, to God’s message given by Jesus. It contains an enlarged set of parables as compared with Mark 4. As in Mark, the first parable, that of the sower, is told simply as a story, and only afterward does it emerge that it is parabolic of the kingdom of heaven. The remaining parables are all cases of “the kingdom of heaven is like” and invite the readers more directly to get beyond the story to the reality presented by it. It is significant that in the explanation of the parable of the sower there is a stress on the need for understanding the message (Mt 13:23, picking up on Mt 13:13, 15); as in Mark the disciples are regarded as having understood the message, whatever may be said about their lack of understanding on other occasions. Also, as in Mark, there may be the implication that Jesus began to speak in this way, which was not understood by everybody, only after people had begun to reject his message. Matthew’s parables include two new ones, the tares and the dragnet, both of which are explained to refer to the final judgment, at which the people of the kingdom or “the righteous” will be glorified in the kingdom of God while the people of the evil one, those who cause sin and do evil, will be cast into eternal fire. More than the other Evangelists, Matthew stresses this element and uses strong language about the remorse and fury of the lost. At the same time, Matthew also depicts the joy of those who find the kingdom for themselves, like somebody finding a hidden treasure or a valuable pearl.\(^1\)

\textbf{The revelation of Jesus as the Messiah.} In the next section devoted to the activity of Jesus, which covers Matthew 13:53–17:27, Matthew follows Mark rather more closely. The minor differences vary in significance. Thus Matthew 13:58 does not really paint Jesus’ inability to work healing miracles in Nazareth any differently from Mark 6:5. A glance at a Synopsis shows that a good many differences are due simply to abbreviation. But there are also additions. The story of Jesus walking on the sea now includes the incident of Peter trying to emulate Jesus and failing. And where the disciples in Mark are filled with amazement and do not understand what is going on, in Matthew they worship Jesus as the Son of God. The element of “secret epiphany”, which some scholars have traced in Mark, is thus all the stronger here.

In Matthew 15 there is some rearrange-


\textsuperscript{17} The vocabulary of joy is almost absent from Mark (but see Mk 4:16).


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ment of the material that may simply be in the interests of greater clarity. Opinions differ whether there is significance in the omission of Mark’s comment that what Jesus said had the effect of declaring all foods clean (Mk 7:19). This is sometimes thought to fit in with a greater tendency to see Jesus as keeping the Jewish law and criticizing the Pharisees more for their failure to keep their own law and for their misinterpretation of it than for emphasizing the importance of the law. But it is rather more probable that Matthew is simply abbreviating Mark, and that his addition in Matthew 15:12–14 sufficiently indicates his rejection of the principle that foods can make people unclean.18

But the most important new material in this section comes in Matthew 16, in the section where Jesus asks his disciples who they think that he is. Peter’s reply, “You are the Christ”, is supplemented by the words “the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16) and is followed by the lengthy saying of Jesus that comments that it is God who has revealed this to him, and then by the saying about Peter being the rock on which Jesus will build his church. The first part of this statement is not surprising in the light of Matthew 11:25–27, where it is the Father who reveals the Son to human beings. The second part is most plausibly interpreted as an identification of Peter as the rock.19 Only here and in Matthew 18:18 does the term church (ekklesia) occur in the Gospels. Its presence fits in with an interest in the Gospel in the disciples as forming a new community that is perhaps more pronounced than in the other Gospels; this community is obviously to be identified with the ongoing community of which Matthew and his readers were part. The same link is achieved by Luke through his compilation of his second volume.20

Peculiar to Matthew are the two following statements. First, the church will be invincible against all opposition. The “gates of Hades” is a reference to the powers of the underworld, which will attack the church.21 The metaphor of the gate continues with a reference to Peter receiving the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The authority that Jesus has to “open the kingdom of heaven to all believers” is extended to his disciple. It is explicated in terms of teaching authority, so that Peter stands over against the Pharisees whose teaching is rejected.

19 But the view that the rock is the words of Jesus or the confession by Peter continues to find some support. See Chrys C. Caragounis, Peter and the Rock (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990); for the more usual interpretation see, for example, Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14–28 (Dallas: Word, 1995), pp. 469–72.
20 Mark knows that the disciples will reasssemble with Jesus in Galilee after his resurrection, but otherwise he is rather silent about the church.
This is the strongest form of statement in which Jesus hands on his own authority for the future to his disciples. It is important that the same statement about “binding and loosing” is made to all the Twelve in Matthew 18:18. The whole paragraph is crucial for its teaching that the church is in effect the new Israel, established by Jesus; the kingdom has been taken from its old leaders and given to a new people who will produce the appropriate harvest (Mt 21:43).22

**The community of disciples.** We can move straight from this section to the fourth teaching section in Matthew 18.23 Here Matthew starts from the conversation about true greatness in the kingdom of heaven that he found in Mark 9:33–50. He sharpens it up by some omission of material and proceeds to bring together other teaching by Jesus that has to do with disciples in community. There is a stress on the importance of the “little ones”, who must be humble believers rather than children (so also in Mt 11:25), that reminds us of Paul’s urging the “strong” to show concern for the “weak” (1 Cor 8–10). Matthew’s version of the parable of the lost sheep is oriented to the duty of disciples to care for erring believers rather than, as in Luke 15, to the justification of Jesus’ mission to the tax collectors and sinners who typify the unconverted. In the second half of the chapter the problem of internal disputes between disciples occurs, and a procedure is established that aims to bring about recognition of one’s fault and consequent reconciliation.24 At the same time, the importance of cleansing the church of faults and disputes is recognized. This procedure may seem to stand in contradiction to the principle established by the parable of the wheat and the tares. However, in the parable the field is the world, not the church, and no interpretation is given to the instruction to the farm workers to let


23 There is nothing distinctive in the rest of Mt 16–17 that requires special comment from a theological angle. Matthew remains fairly close to Mark.

24 The procedure described is reduced to essentials. It is assumed that the fault is clearly established. Opportunities for recognition and reconciliation are created, and it would be wrong to assume that only three opportunities need be given; the implication is rather that there comes a point when all reasonable attempts to heal the dispute have failed, and in that case the congregation must take action so that there is no continuing breach within the actual circle of the congregation. Nothing is said to imply that the exclusion is permanent and cannot be withdrawn.


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wheat and tares grow together until the harvest; this detail is simply part of the scenery in the story and does not have any parabolic significance.

To the action of the congregation is attributed the same authority as was given to Peter.\(^{25}\) A further reinforcement of the congregation’s action is conveyed in the next statement, which assures a gathering of even two believers that their prayers will be answered; this is because if they gather together in the name of Jesus, he is with them and his prayers reinforce theirs (Mt 18:19–20). It is the Synoptic equivalent of John 16:23–24.

The procedure for dealing with faults by giving three opportunities for repentance to the offender is now followed by an instruction to the offended person to be prepared to forgive seventy-seven times. This teaching is reinforced by a parable whose meaning is dazzlingly obvious, provided we remember that in the language of parables “a king” is a fairly sure pointer to God. If this were not obvious in itself, the reference to a debt of ten thousand talents shows that we are not dealing with the real world of human beings.

This chapter demonstrates more than any other, perhaps, the pastoral aspects of Matthew’s theology and his insight into the sheer grace of God toward sinners.\(^{26}\)

\(^{25}\) Consequently, there is no need for Peter to have a successor.

\(^{26}\) Cf. Donald A. Hagner, “Righteousness in

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**Jesus teaches in Jerusalem.** With this discourse we reach the end of the Galilean mission of Jesus; Matthew 19:1 marks the shift to Judea and Jerusalem, and from this point Matthew again runs parallel to Mark. There are a few significant differences. In Matthew 19:28–29 the promise that the disciples will be recompensed in the age to come for their self-denial in this age is supplemented by the saying (also found in Lk 22:28–30) that those who have followed Jesus will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel when the Son of Man comes. This saying is important as showing that the mission of Jesus is concerned with the renewal of Israel in the new age.

A second insertion is the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), which reinforces the message about the grace of God that is given to those who need it rather than to those who deserve it. Such a parable as this, of course, is told to those who think that they especially deserve God’s favor rather than to those who need it; it displays important resemblances to the parable of the two sons in Luke 15.\(^{27}\) The same theme recurs later in the Matthean parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28–32).

Meanwhile, Jesus approaches ever closer


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to Jerusalem, and the shadow of the cross begins to become more pronounced, reminding the disciples that there will be no crowns or thrones for them without first drinking the cup of suffering with Jesus.\textsuperscript{28} Yet there is a sense in which Jesus enters Jerusalem as already its king; it is Matthew who cites Zechariah 9:9 in connection with the entry and thus aligns himself with Luke and John in their identification of Jesus as the king—who is about to be rejected. The crowds, however, recognize him only as a prophet (Mt 21:11), whereas the children in the temple (cf. Mt 11:25!) recognize him as the “Son of David” (Mt 21:15).\textsuperscript{29}

In the encounters with his opponents in Jerusalem, Matthew has a sharper form of the parable of the tenants. For him it culminates in the hearers themselves drawing the conclusion as to what the owner of the vineyard will do to the workers who murdered the son and thus laying themselves open to the prophecy that the kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to a people who will produce the fruit (Mt 21:40–46). This is to be seen as a judgment primarily upon the Jewish leaders who will be replaced by the church or its leaders as the overseers of the people of God.\textsuperscript{30}

At this point Matthew inserts yet another parable, that of the wedding banquet, which is concerned with the people who are invited into the kingdom of heaven (Mt 22:1–14); those originally invited make light of the invitation, whereas a very mixed bag of people, good and bad, are brought in. Nevertheless, it remains possible for people to come in and yet fail to show appreciation of their privilege; they are “in but not of the kingdom”, and they will be uncovered at the final judgment. Matthew allows no complacency among his Christian readers.

Matthew’s major intrusion in the story at this point is his enlargement of the warning given in Mark 12:37–40 against the scribes into an extended warning that then develops into a series of accusations directed against the scribes and Pharisees, who are addressed

\textsuperscript{28} Matthew omits mention of the baptism that they must undergo, possibly because the saying appeared to be too cryptic.

\textsuperscript{29} Surprisingly Matthew and Luke omit the phrase found in Mk 11:17 that the temple will be called a house of prayer for all the nations. This may reflect the fact that the temple was destroyed and the prophecy was not fulfilled literally.

\textsuperscript{30} Opinions differ whether this verse is simply about a change of leadership or is also about the replacement of Israel by the church. The latter understanding is more probable (cf. Menninger, \textit{Israel}, pp. 151–53). The word \textit{replacement} is, however, inappropriate and open to misunderstanding. The point is that, now that the Messiah has been revealed, the faithful remnant within the nation of Israel will consist of those who accept Jesus as the Messiah (augmented by Gentile believers).
as if they were present. Although the concern is largely with their inconsistent behavior, which combined punctilious observance of certain pious customs with a basic impiety, there are theological implications. There is a clear call to Jesus’ followers to be consistent in their way of life. There is also a replacement of the scribes by one teacher, the Christ, and a denial of the title of “father” to human teachers. Coupled closely with this is an insistence on the brotherhood of all believers and a call to all to act as servants of one another. Any suggestion that the Twelve, for instance, have an exalted position because of their role (cf. Mt 19:28), is firmly denied.

Closely connected with this discourse but clearly separate from it is the final discourse in the Gospel that consists essentially of the teaching about the future in Matthew 24 (= Mk 13) supplemented by the three parables in Matthew 25. Thus there is some ambiguity as to whether the fifth and final discourse in the Gospel consists of Matthew 23–25 or simply of Matthew 24–25.31

Matthew 24 is fairly closely parallel to Mark 13, but it contains extra material from the Q tradition.32 Matthew emphasizes the danger that some among the disciples may be tempted to fall away. He also comments that the coming of the Son of Man will be preceded by the appearance of his sign in heaven.33 Nevertheless, the coming of the last day will still be unexpected and unpredictable, and Matthew includes strong warnings to disciples to be ready for that day and to live in such a way that they will not be caught unawares and be liable to judgment instead of salvation.

This last point is developed in the three parables that follow. The first of them emphasizes the danger of not being ready at the time. The second stresses the need to occupy the intervening time in conduct that wins the Lord’s approval. Alongside the stress on grace and on reward for the undeserving, there is still the recognition that entry into the kingdom is entry into a realm parallel to Mk 13:9–13 already in Mt 10:17–22, but this does not seriously affect the flow of the passage.

31 If the reference is to the parousia, then the sign probably functions as a warning to gather together for the final battle. France’s interpretation of this section with reference to the fall of Jerusalem and the worldwide mission of the church fails to come up with a clear proposal for how the sign might be interpreted on this scenario; see R. T. France, The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 344–45.

of service for God. The final “parable” is, of course, not a parable but a pictorial description of the final judgment, which is in the hands of the Son of Man, now clearly identified as “the king”. It emerges that service to the king is what counts at the judgment, but this service is achieved by serving his brothers and sisters. On the one hand, people who may think that they are the king’s servants but have failed to serve him because they did not serve his people are condemned. On the other hand, people who did not realize that they were serving the king in serving his people discover that they were serving him. Although the parable is commonly interpreted to mean that people can serve God or Christ unawares, the point would rather seem to be simply that the service of God or Christ takes place when the command to love one another and one’s enemies is fulfilled, and the thought that this can happen unawares is not a point to be interpreted on its own.\(^\text{34}\)

**The death and resurrection of Jesus.**

For the last time we read “When Jesus had finished saying all these things”. The final part of the Gospel then traces the story of the passion and the resurrection. Little needs to be said theologically about the former part of the story, since it is close to Mark and there are no particularly significant changes.\(^\text{35}\) Thus, when Matthew’s version adds that the blood of Jesus is poured out “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28), this makes explicit what is implicit in the Markan account.

In the latter part of the story there are major matters to note. First, there is the story that at the death of Jesus there was an earthquake and the bodies of dead holy people were raised to life and appeared after Jesus’ resurrection to many people (Mt 27:52–53). Whether this is historical or not,\(^\text{36}\) it is theological testimony to the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus had decisive consequences for the fate of the dead. Until this point the resurrection of

34 To put it plainly, the parable is probably not meant to teach that people who have another or no religion will be saved at the last judgment simply through showing kindness to the needy, even if they had never believed in Christ, whether or not this possibility is taught elsewhere in the New Testament. The point is rather that service to the king’s people is service to the king.

35 The fact that according to some manuscripts Matthew gave the name of Barabbas as “Jesus Barabbas” (Mt 27:16–17 TNIV text; NRSV text) has literary rather than theological significance.


dead people was little more than a hope based on such prophecy as Daniel 12; now, it is claimed, there is a proleptic fulfillment of it.

Second, Matthew records the appearance of Jesus to the women who had visited the tomb (Mt 28:8–10). The promise that the disciples would see him is accordingly fulfilled, and indeed more than fulfilled. For the prophecy referred only to a sighting in Galilee to the disciples, but here there is already a fulfillment to the women in Jerusalem.

And third, when the disciples do see Jesus in Galilee, it is a numinous experience on a mountain at which they are moved to worship (Mt 28:16–20). The final words of Jesus to them are a declaration of tremendous authority; the Son of Man is now in effect seated on his throne. Therefore, the disciples must go now to all the nations and make disciples. They will baptize them in the combined name of the Father, Son and Spirit. They will teach them to keep the commands of Jesus. And they are assured of the presence of Jesus everywhere and for all time. Nothing could bring out more forcibly the supreme position of Jesus alongside God the Father, and at the same time the fulfillment of the Emmanuel prophecy at his birth.

**Theological Themes**

In the second part of this discussion we endeavor to draw together what we have learned from our survey of the Gospel’s theological story and to characterize the nature of the theology that is expressed by Matthew.

**Matthew’s understanding of Jesus.**

As in all the Gospels the center of Matthew’s theology is Jesus. There is a clear understanding of Jesus as a genuine human being, but since it has no specific vocabulary dedicated to it, this is much more a basic feature of the narrative that can be taken for granted and therefore is in danger of being overlooked. In terms of designations for Jesus, Matthew’s christology is not markedly different from that of Mark, with the same use of “Christ”, “Son of God” and “Son of Man”. But there are differences or changes of emphasis. Whereas Mark began his Gospel simply by designating its subject as Jesus Christ and the Son of God, Matthew has his birth narrative in which the significance of these terms emerges more clearly. The name Jesus is associated with salvation, although subsequently the theme is not really more prominent than in Mark.

The role of Jesus as Messiah is brought out by the quest of the magi and the equation that is made between the Christ and the king of the Jews. As in Mark, the term king is prominent in the passion narrative, but it is also used at the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and especially with reference to his future role at the judgment. The traditional role of the king or a messianic figure as a shepherd of the people is taken over from Mark; it is

to be traced in the motif of compassion for the shepherdless sheep in Matthew 9:36 (cf. Mk 6:34 in the context of the feeding of the five thousand), and is also present in the description of the last judgment (Mt 25:32–33).

Particularly characteristic of Matthew is the identity of Jesus as “Son of David” that occurs in the first verse of the Gospel and is used especially in connection with healings performed by Jesus (Mt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31 par. Mk 10:47–48); clearly in this context the conversation in Matthew 22:41–46 is not meant to be construed as a denial by Jesus of this designation as inappropriate, but it is rather an invitation to ponder the riddle of how David’s son can also be his lord. Moreover, the role of the Son of David is seen to be significantly rewritten in the light of Jesus’ compassionate actions for the needy.

The exalted position of Jesus is further underlined by the much greater frequency of use of the address “Lord” (Kyrie), which is the normal address by sympathetic, committed people to Jesus, sometimes corresponding to the use of “Rabbi” in Mark. Although this term need be no more than a basic title of respect, the frequency of usage and the contextual indicators suggest that there is a rather greater degree of reverence in its use. Several people who come to Jesus are said to show reverence to him (proskuneō); this is the appropriate attitude to a king (Mt 2:2), and something of the same aura may surround the subsequent uses. This motif reaches its climax in the final, postresurrection scene where Jesus is worshiped by the Eleven and proclaims his absolute authority.

Matthew’s use of “Son of Man” is more prolific than Mark’s, basically because he has more sayings of Jesus available to him. The general tendency that results is more of a stress on the identity of Jesus as the coming Son of Man and as a figure who is rejected on earth.

Similarly, the use of additional source material leads to the greater prominence of “Son of God” in Matthew. The motif is implicit in the announcement of the birth of Jesus, which will take place by the Holy Spirit, and then emerges in the quotation from Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15. In Mark the title is used only by nonhuman actors before the crucifixion, but in Matthew the disciples worship Jesus as the Son of God

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39 Cf. Mt 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17. The term is also used in Mk 5:6 and, after the resurrection, in Lk 24:52. In each of the Synoptic Gospels there are isolated examples of people falling on their knees before Jesus (Mt 17:14; Mk 1:40; 10:17; Lk 5:8).


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after the stilling of the storm (Mt 14:33), and Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi includes this phrase (Mt 16:16). Moreover, Matthew includes the explicit statement of Jesus about the relationship of the Father and the Son and the latter’s role in revelation of the Father (Mt 11:25–27). For Matthew, then, the recognition of Jesus as Son of God by human beings occurs more powerfully than in Mark, where it does not emerge until the confession of the centurion after the death of Jesus (Mk 15:39).41

There has been some discussion as to whether the concept of Messiah or that of Son of God has priority in Matthew’s christology.42 The debate is probably futile, and we should recognize that both lines of thought are essential for a full understanding of the role and status of Jesus.43 Perhaps we are to see some development in the Gospel.

41 In one or two places Matthew uses the term “the Son” rather than “the Son of God” or equivalents; see Mt 11:27; 24:36; 28:19. Since the Son of Man has God as his Father (Mt 16:27), Meier, Vision, pp. 82–83, 172, wants to argue that “the Son” is not necessarily equivalent to “the Son of God” but rather has connections also with “Son of Man”, especially in Mt 24:36.

42 For the latter view see especially Jack D. Kingsbury, Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

43 See, for example, J. Riches, Matthew (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 88–93.

At the outset Jesus is principally the messianic Son of David, thus emphasizing his role in relation to Israel, and his divine origin is stressed rather than his sonship. By the end of the Gospel he is named in a trinitarian formula as the Son of God, thus emphasizing his cosmic status for the world after the resurrection. But the difference is purely one of emphasis, and throughout the Gospel both lines of thought are held together.

Over against this tendency to exaltation, however, must be placed the identification of Jesus as the Servant of the Lord who works quietly and gently rather than by raising his voice (Mt 12:18–21, citing Is 42:1–4), and this is confirmed by the claim of Jesus to be gentle and humble (Mt 11:29; cf. Mt 21:5).44 According to David Hill, Matthew gives content to the concept of Jesus as Son of God by his development of servanthood.45

The role of Jesus cannot be ascertained purely by a study of titles and designations. In particular, his role as teacher and miracle worker is of central importance and is not tied to any one type of christological designation. Two further possible aspects of his status that are not expressed in titles require consideration here.

44 For a full exploration of the significance of the term, including especially its connections with justice, see Beaton, Isaiah’s Christ.

45 Hill, “Son”.


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First, there is the question whether the Jewish figure of Wisdom is significant for Matthew’s christology. There is no dispute that on occasion Jesus speaks in the manner of a wise teacher, using the kind of sayings found in the wisdom tradition. Nor is there any dispute that Jesus is seen as an envoy (child) of Wisdom in Luke 7:35. However, Matthew 11:19 has the same saying in the form: “wisdom is proved right by her actions”, which has been taken to imply an identification of Jesus with Wisdom.\(^46\) There is also a puzzle with the saying of Jesus in Luke 11:49–51 which is said to emanate from “the Wisdom of God”, who speaks in the first person; in Matthew 23:34–39, however, this saying is uttered by Jesus himself. Does this mean that Matthew silently identified Jesus as Wisdom? Similarly, Jesus speaks in a style that could be seen as typical of an utterance by Wisdom in Matthew 11:28–30, although we have no precise parallel elsewhere to confirm this supposition.

These pieces of evidence have been sufficient to persuade some scholars that for Matthew Jesus is seen in the role of Wisdom, but it is significant that there is no clear use of the term as a title, and it cannot be said to play a major role in the Gospel compared with the other christological categories.\(^47\)

Certainly this identification would be appropriate in a Gospel that places so much stress upon Jesus as a teacher and emphasizes the divine origin and authority of his sayings (cf. Mt 8:8). It would also be appropriate in complementing the understanding of Jesus as the Son of God; in both cases we have a divine agent who is close to God.

More significant is the fact that Jesus may be seen as a counterpart to Moses with an authority that exceeds his.\(^48\) This understanding of Jesus as a new Moses does justice to the major place that teaching has in the Gospel and fits in with the overall thrust of the Gospel as a work that is especially concerned with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism.\(^49\)

**The gospel and Judaism.** It is now appropriate to observe how Jesus and his mission are understood within a Jewish context and in relation to Judaism in this Gospel. At the beginning of the Gospel the

\(^{46}\)But is the saying really anything more than a comparison between Jesus and wisdom, or simply a proverbial saying?


\(^{49}\)Another possibility is that Jesus is seen as embodying Israel (cf. Mt 2:15).


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genealogy insists that Jesus is a descendant of Abraham as well as of David. Many aspects of his identity and his deeds, as well as of what happens to him, are related to prophecies in the Scriptures. Of all the Evangelists it is Matthew who focuses most on this point by his frequent use of the formal quotations introduced by such formulae as “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet”. There is no doubt that Matthew was responsible for this characteristic of his narrative, although some of the material used was traditional. The feature is thus not original to Matthew, but he formalizes it in a way that the other Evangelists do not. It is important for him to be able to show that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures. But why is it important? One element may be apologetic, to prove that Jesus is indeed the expected deliverer, since his work corresponds with the job description provided by the prophets. That this was an element in early Christian apologetic is apparent from such a passage as Acts 17:2–3. At the same time, the usage enables the development of an understanding of the work of Jesus in terms of prophecy and fulfillment. A plan of God is being worked out in history, and the effect is to see the work of Jesus as the culmination of what God has been doing over the centuries past.

But to say this raises the question of the relation between the past and the present; more specifically it raises the question of the Jews in relation to this plan.

Matthew, like the New Testament writers generally, works with a scheme of promise and fulfillment, in which the coming of Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the scriptural prophecies of the Messiah and the coming era of divine blessing. The effect of this understanding is to produce a broad division of history into two periods, that of the promise and that of the fulfillment. That Matthew shares this understanding is to be seen especially from Matthew 11:12–13, where there is a distinction between the time up to John the Baptist (when the Prophets and the Law were foretelling what would happen), and the period from John the Baptist onward (during which the kingdom of heaven is active).

There is, however, considerable debate over the fine-tuning of this basic insight. In his well-known discussion of Luke’s understanding of history Hans Conzelmann argued that an original Christian understanding of time as divided into the past age and new age, with the assumption that the coming of Jesus heralded the imminent arrival of the new age, was reinterpreted by Luke into a scheme of three periods. The time of preparation was followed by the time of Jesus, which in turn is followed by the time of the church. In this way, Luke dealt with the problem caused by the increasing time gap between the coming of Jesus and the coming of the final consummation by interpolating the time of the church and by regarding the coming of Jesus as marking


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“the middle of time” rather than the inauguration of the end of time.\(^{50}\)

Inevitably, the question has arisen as to whether Matthew shares a similar understanding of history. And if so, does he think basically in terms of two eras (promise and fulfillment) or of three (the times of Israel, Jesus and the church)? Or should we adopt a more complicated understanding with as many as five periods?\(^{51}\) All things considered, it is probable that in Matthew, as in Luke, we should see a basic distinction between the time of promise and that of fulfillment but recognize that within the period of fulfillment there is an obvious subdistinction between the time of Jesus’ ministry, which inaugurates the new age of the kingdom of heaven, and the time of the church, which continues what Jesus inaugurated.\(^{52}\)

John P. Meier argues strongly that for Matthew the death and resurrection of Jesus mark the key stage in the coming of the new age, with the apocalyptic events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus and the acknowledgment of Jesus as Son of God by the Gentile centurion and those with him.\(^{53}\)

Closely associated with this question is that of the relationship of the Jews to the church. The scheme of the times of promise and fulfillment need in itself be no more than simply an account of the stages in the outworking of God’s initiative for the salvation of the peoples of the world. But clearly there is a parallel problem raised by the existence of Israel as the people of God in the period of promise and the establishment of the church as the people who believed that the promises were being fulfilled in them. How are Israel and the church related? Or, more precisely, how are the Jews in the time of Jesus and the church related to the people of God? And linked with this are the important questions of the place of the Gentiles in the church and its mission, and the continuing validity or otherwise of the law of Moses.

**The law and the new righteousness.**

By physical descent the Jews were the descendants of the people to whom the promises had been made in the Scriptures. Equally they were the people who had inherited the law of Moses, which they still regarded as binding. Then we have to remember that the Gospel was written at a time when a church had developed that included Jewish and Gentile Christians. Judaism certainly allowed for the entry of proselytes,\(^ {54}\) but on nothing like the scale on which Gentiles had flooded into the early


\(^{51}\) For this last view see Scot McKnight, *DJG*, pp. 536–38.

\(^{52}\) This analysis is similar to that of Kingsbury, *Matthew*.


\(^{54}\) Cf. Mt 23:15. The much-debated question as to the nature and extent of “mission” among the Jews at this time can be left aside here.
church and certainly only on the understanding that they would accept the law of Moses in full. And, further, Judaism was dominated at the popular level by the attempts of the Pharisaic party to encourage minute observance of the law on all the people and not just on the priests. As we have already noted, these issues can be detected as part of the agenda in the Gospel of Mark, but they come to special prominence in Matthew. Scholars, to be sure, are divided over whether Matthew is a Jewish-Christian or a Gentile-Christian Gospel. Suffice it to say that the evidence is puzzling, but there are far fewer puzzles if the former solution (which is the majority view) is adopted. On the whole, it is more plausible that the author is a Jewish Christian who writes the Gospel with the situation that has just been sketched very much in his mind.\(^{55}\)

How, then, does the Gospel deal with these issues?

**Jesus and the law of Moses.** The teaching of Jesus was given historically to a Jewish audience, and there was little direct contact with Gentiles. Therefore, Jesus could naturally assume the context of Jewish piety and speak to people on the assumption that they continue to carry out Jewish religious practices (Mt 5:23–24; 6:1–17). It would have been anachronistic to do otherwise. His discussion of divorce is often thought to have been put in the context of the well-known scribal dispute over the grounds for divorce (Mt 5:31–32; 19:3). In this context the abolition of the law of Moses does not arise.\(^{56}\)

Jesus can also tell his audience to obey what the scribes and the Pharisees tell them to do (Mt 23:2–3; cf. how approval is apparently given to the tithes on spices, Mt 23:23). This is frankly puzzling, for it stands in some tension with the rest of Jesus’ teaching and even with the next verse, where the teaching of the scribes is characterized as “heavy loads”; moreover in Matthew 15:1–11 the tradition of the elders is contrasted with the command of God. One possibility is that Matthew 23:2–3 is heavily ironic. Another possibility is that Jesus is contrasting the reading of the law of Moses by the scribes and Pharisees with the way in which they interpreted and practiced it.\(^{57}\)

**Radicalizing the law.** As already noted, Matthew records the teaching of Jesus that divides the history of God’s dealings with his people into two stages, the period of the law and the prophets, and the time of the action of the kingdom of heaven

55 For the view that Matthew was a Gentile, see (for example), Meier, *Vision*, pp. 17–25.

56 On the interpretation of these contested passages see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions and Pastoral Realities* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

behavior over against the carrying out of ritual and ceremonial (cf. Mt 9:13; 12:7, citing Hos 6:6). Rather, then, the law is taken up into a new expression of the will of God as taught by Jesus, and at the end of the Gospel the disciples are to teach people “to obey everything that I have commanded you”—with no mention of the law.

Matthew gives a powerful impression of presenting the teaching of Jesus as a new law by the way in which he puts Jesus’ teaching about the behavior of disciples up front and does so in a way which makes him appear as standing over against Moses. This could mean that he presents Jesus as a second Moses, giving a new Torah (based on the old, but going beyond it), or it could mean that he presents Jesus as doing something different from Moses. On the whole, the former is more likely, provided we recognize that what Jesus says is concerned with attitudes of the heart, and instruction about these is not “law” in the normal sense of the term.

In this connection an important element in Matthew’s vocabulary is righteousness and rightous. The godly people of the past (Mt

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58 This way of putting it would imply that Jesus could well have approved of the tradition if it helped to clarify the law.

59 We should not, to be sure, make the mistake of assuming that Moses was concerned purely with outward observances and not also with motives and a spiritual relationship to God.

60 Matthew uses these two words twenty-three times, Mark two times, and Luke twelve times. For a balanced summary of the issues see Hagner,
13:17; 23:35) and the present (Mt 13:43, 49; 25:37, 46) are characterized as “righteous”, which means quite simply that they lived according to the will of God as expressed in his commandments (as Lk 1:6 nicely puts it), even if they are persecuted for doing so (Mt 5:10). Matthew’s main emphasis appears to be that the task of John (Mt 21:32) and Jesus (cf. Mt 3:15) is to teach and inculcate the way of life that is demanded by God’s will and is closely associated with the kingdom of heaven (Mt 6:33). There has been considerable discussion of Matthew 5:6, 20. The latter verse requires the hearers to do more (or better) righteousness than the Pharisees if they want to enter the kingdom of heaven. This gives the impression that living righteously now is the condition or qualification for future entry into the kingdom. And it is closely linked to the teaching that people must practice even the least of the commandments. It is impossible that Jesus is going further down the line followed by the Pharisees with their emphasis on the trivial commandments, unless he is saying that one must keep the trivial commandments and also the major ones (as apparently in Mt 23:23); it seems more likely that Jesus is emphasizing the importance of keeping the law as a whole, and uses rhetorical, that is, hyperbolical, language to do so. In Matthew 5:6 the issue is whether hunger and thirst for righteousness is for the ability to do what God commands, that is, to be what God wants them to be, or is for righteousness in the Pauline sense of being accepted by God as “justified by faith”, or (most probably) is a cry for justice to be shown to the oppressed (cf. Lk 18:3 for the motif). Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes is on the whole concerned with things that God’s people do rather than (as in Luke) with needs that are supplied and situations that are reversed, but this verse may be the exception to this generalization.

**The practicability of a new way of life.** The Gospels inculcate a radical code of behavior. The Sermon on the Mount in particular has often been thought to be too impractical and perfectionistic to be taken seriously, and it has even been suggested that its function is to show up human sinfulness rather than to present a viable code of behavior. What the Gospels do not seem to do is to promise divine help in living in the kingdom, such as we find in Paul’s teaching about the function of the Holy Spirit or the power of the new life in union with the resurrected Lord. For Matthew the life and activity of Jesus is closely related to the Spirit. The Spirit is active in his conception (Mt 1:18, 20) and comes upon Jesus at his baptism (Mt 3:16), as prophesied by Isaiah (Mt 12:18). It is Matthew who records that Jesus cast out demons by the power of the Spirit of God (Mt 12:28; Luke’s “by the finger of God” conveys the same meaning), and this is confirmed by the saying in which Jesus regards blasphemy against the Holy


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Spirit as an unforgivable sin, the reference in the context being to the denial that what Jesus was doing was done by the power of the Spirit (Mt 12:31–32). But apart from the promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11) and Jesus’ promise that the Spirit of the Father would assist the disciples in times of persecution (Mt 10:20), there is nothing about any kind of life in the power of the Spirit. What we do have, however, is the promise of Jesus to be with his disciples (Mt 18:20; 28:20; cf. Mt 1:23), which implies guidance for the church and enabling companionship on the task of mission and discipleship. Implicit in this promise may be the ability to live life according to the commands of Jesus.

The kingdom of heaven. The teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven focuses on this righteousness or divinely willed behavior that its members should demonstrate. This raises the question whether Matthew thinks of a future kingdom that is entered by those who are qualified to do so or of a present kingdom in which its members behave in the ways that God commands. For Matthew the kingdom is undeniably future in the sense that people will enter it in the future. At the same time it is powerfully at work or powerfully opposed in the present time, and it grows like a tree or works like leaven; people can be “people of the kingdom” here and now. It would be possible to interpret discipleship to mean that people who follow Jesus and obey his teaching are disciples and will at a future time enter the kingdom, rather than that genuine discipleship of Jesus is the same thing as being in the kingdom here and now. Probably the decisive evidence is Matthew 23:13, which clearly refers to entry to the kingdom in the present tense. We have to reckon with the present reality and the future hope of the kingdom as a realm which people may be in.

The God of the kingdom. From the concept of the kingdom of heaven it is a natural step to consider the place of God in the Gospel. God is the character who is most often neglected in studies of New Testament theology. This is not surprising, given the fact that the prime purpose of the New Testament is to express the missionary revelation of this God in Christ, with the risk that the emphasis may fall on the agent of revelation rather than upon the person revealed. To be sure, Matthew does make reference to the kingdom as the kingdom of the Son of Man (Mt 13:41; cf. the close link between


the Son of Man as king and the kingdom in Mt 25:31, 34). He immediately follows this with a reference to “the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43); there is evidently no conflict between these two expressions.

Archibald M. Hunter expressed the essential point neatly with his comment that “the King in the Kingdom is a Father”, thereby indicating that it is within the new relationship of disciples to Jesus that God is experienced as Father who cares for their needs (Mt 6:25–34). This characterization of God is not unknown by any means in the Old Testament and Judaism, but it was only with the teaching of Jesus that it became dominant to such an extent that the New Testament writers (such as Paul) can assume it as the normal way of understanding God. Matthew’s Gospel more than Mark or Luke develops this new evaluation of God as Father. Mark uses the term of God a mere four times (three times of God as the Father of Jesus, and once of the heavenly Father of the disciples). Luke has it seventeen times. But Matthew has it forty-four times, frequently of God as the Father of Jesus but also of God as the Father of the disciples. It is probable that several of the references are due to Matthew using more widely an idiom that was certainly present in his sources as Jesus’ characteristic way of speaking about God.

At the same time, the personal relationships into which God enters with disciples do not diminish his greatness (Mt 5:34–35), and Matthew emphasizes his activity as judge who will act against all evil and disobedience to his will. Matthew in fact holds together in a remarkable way the mercy and goodness of God and his strict judgment. The language used to express the results of the latter is strong, with references to the wicked being cast into outer darkness (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) or into the eternal fire of Gehenna (Mt 5:22; 18:8–9; 25:41; cf. the parabolic imagery in Mt 3:10–12 [John the Baptist’s teaching]; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50). This language is not unparalleled in the other Gospels (Mk 9:43, 48; Lk 3:9, 16–17) but on nothing like the scale in Matthew.

**Israel and the church.** In the light of all this, we can now see that the coming of Jesus constitutes a new age in which the kingdom is at work and the Messiah is present. The leaders of the Jews were the agents of God, and the kingdom belonged to them (Mt 21:43) in the sense that they had jurisdiction over it. But this jurisdiction will be taken from them and given to another group of people. Matthew speaks as if there is only one kingdom, and what takes place is a change in the people to whom it is promised. The Jewish leaders have forfeited that right. Had they responded positively to the Messiah it is conceivable that they might have sat on thrones ruling the twelve tribes

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of Israel. But that possibility never arose. It is the attitude to Jesus and his teaching that is decisive; as Luke’s version states, Jesus is the stone over which people stumble and fall, and equally he is the stone that falls on people and destroys them (Lk 20:18).

The new people of the kingdom are, of course, the disciples of Jesus. Despite the fact that Jesus came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel and forbade his disciples to go to non-Jews (Mt 10:5; cf. Mt 15:24), there are signs in plenty that Matthew envisaged this new people as including the Gentiles. This is crystal clear in Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:19, which refer to a mission by the disciples in the future. It is also indicated by the fact that Matthew records material that points to the openness of the Messiah to the Gentiles: the visit of the magi, right up front in the Gospel; the prophecy of many coming from east and west into the kingdom (Mt 8:11); the mission of the Servant (Mt 12:18–21, especially Mt 12:18, 21); Jesus’ eventual response to the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28); the judgment on the sheep and the goats, which deals with people from “all the nations” (Mt 25:31–46). Consequently, the restriction of Jesus’ mission and that of the disciples to the Jews can be understood only as a case of priorities and hardly of strategy. Elsewhere in the New Testament some writers see a divine necessity for the kingdom to be proclaimed first of all to those to whom it had originally been promised; the Jews are “the subjects [sons] of the kingdom” (Mt 8:12), and Jesus is concerned with the renewal of the people of God, which is then enlarged by being opened to all nations. If there is a rationale for the inclusion of the nations, it will lie in the biblical picture of the role of the Servant and of God’s own people in being a light to the nations.

Further evidence that Matthew saw the kingdom of heaven as already present is to be seen in Jesus’ teaching about the church. Matthew uses this term in two passages. In the latter (Mt 18:17) it evidently refers to a limited, local group of people, and in a Jewish context this could simply be a synagogue community. However, to Christian readers the word would undoubtedly signify a Christian congregation. This is particularly so, since this reference comes after the earlier one in Matthew 16:18, where the language is of a different kind. Here Jesus founds an ekklēsia that has a cosmic role in that it has the powers of death arrayed against it, and it or its leaders has the key that controls entry to the kingdom of heaven. As envisaged by Jesus, this commu-

\[63\] It is of course the case that, practically speaking, if Jesus had begun by going to the Gentiles, he would have lost all credibility with the Jews, but it is very doubtful whether this consideration was in the minds of the New Testament writers.

\[64\] In Mt 13:38 the same phrase is used for those who respond to the teaching of Jesus.


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nity may have been small and insignificant by human standards, but in the light of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven it is set for stupendous growth. Moreover, Matthew is concerned about how people relate to one another within this community. As we have seen, Matthew 18 is concerned with the relationships between disciples and specifically the pastoral concerns that people should not fall away and that it should be necessary to thrust them out. It can be presumed that the church and the disciples are the same entity. Nevertheless, the future tense may suggest that the church did not come into being until it was established under the leadership of Peter and the rest of the Twelve.

For Matthew, Israel finds its future in the church, the people who recognize that the Messiah has come. It is the sole entity that continues into the future; there cannot be any place for another church, which will withstand the onslaught of Hades. The position of the Twelve on their thrones as the judges of Israel indicates that the present leadership of Judaism have had their rule over the kingdom taken away from them. This does not mean that there is no future for Jews in the kingdom or that the church’s mission goes solely to the Gentiles. The church or the new Israel consists of believing Jews and Gentiles; the disciples’ mission is to all nations, which includes the Jewish nation. As Donald A. Hagner puts it, “The church does not take the place of Israel; rather Israel finds its true identity in the church”.

**Conclusion**

Matthew’s theology is accordingly concerned very much with establishing the relationship of Jesus and the church to Judaism. His Gospel provides a foundation in the mission and teaching of Jesus for a church composed of Jews and Gentiles, called to a mission to all nations, including Jews, and conscious of itself as inheriting the gracious promises of God to his people in the Scriptures. It is probably a strongly Jewish-Christian audience that he has in mind, and his Gospel indicates powerfully that the law given by Moses is still valid in the sense that it has been taken up by Jesus and incorporated in his new teaching. So paradoxically the law continues to be valid, but only in the new form in which it is taught by Jesus.

65 Donald A. Hagner, *NDBT*, p. 264. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, it is not a question of supersessionism, as if the church has replaced Israel and God’s promises to Israel are no longer valid. On the contrary, God has renewed his covenant with his people; the elements of renewal include the fact that the Messiah has now come, and therefore acceptance of the covenant entails acceptance of the Messiah, and the opening up of the covenant people to include Gentiles who accept the Messiah.

66 This raises the question whether Matthew saw
At the end of our discussion of Mark we endeavored to characterize his theology by analyzing it in terms of its framework, central theme and the detailed outworking of the theme. What happens when we attempt the same exercise for Matthew?

The framework of thought in Matthew appears to be essentially the same as in Mark, but Matthew is more overtly concerned with the Jewish people.

Matthew’s main theme is the teaching of Jesus as the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which requires a new way of life from its members, seen in a rejection of false religion and its replacement by a radical obedience to God’s law expressed in love and compassion.

Analyzing this in greater detail and implicitly comparing it with Mark’s presentation, we note the following significant elements.

1. Matthew underlines the way in which Jesus saw the people in their needy condition and attacked their religious leaders for their failure to carry out the religion that they taught.

2. Jesus demonstrated the presence of the rule of God by his powerful acts of healing and compassion. He understood the character of God in terms of fatherhood toward those who respond to the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

3. Jesus’ role is seen as a combination of being Messiah and Son of God in virtue of his birth, but he also functions like a new Moses in authoritatively teaching people God’s law and as the humble yet powerful Servant of the Lord. He is seen as mediating the presence of God to people, and he himself is present spiritually with his followers (presumably this is a promise for the postresurrection period).

4. Jesus gathers followers and intends to raise up an ekklésia on the foundation of his first followers. He anticipates the development of community life among them.

5. The Gospel looks forward to the ongoing mission to bring in Gentiles as followers of Jesus, although Jesus tended to restrict his activity and that of his earthly followers to the Jewish population. Although Jesus stated that the leadership of God’s people would be taken from its present Jewish leaders, believing Jews still have their place in the new people of God.

6. The understanding of God’s will as love is intensified by the inclusion of enemies as proper objects of love. There is also a stress on the need for true righteousness as opposed to empty piety.

7. The death of Jesus is seen as sacrificial and redemptive, leading to forgiveness of sins by God.


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8. The reality of God’s final judgment, carried out by the Son of Man and issuing in eternal bliss or condemnation, is emphasized.

Such a brief summary runs the risk of caricature. Nevertheless, it may suffice to indicate how the theology of Matthew essentially incorporates that of Mark but goes beyond it in significant ways.

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