

Describe and explain Matthew's distinctive interests and emphases. How is the book designed to convey them?

Each of the gospels may be said to have its own agenda or purpose, such that there is "both a unity and a differentiation between the books which make up God's self-revelation" (Jackman 1994: 2). The purpose of this essay is to describe and explain Matthew's distinctive interests and emphases, and to examine the way he designed his account of the life and ministry of Jesus to highlight certain major themes which distinguish it from the other synoptic gospels. The essay is structured as follows: first the context within which Matthew was writing, and which had a bearing on its date and location, is briefly considered. Secondly some of the theories about the design of the gospel are examined, and this leads, thirdly, onto consideration of the main themes that indicate the writer's preoccupations. It needs to be acknowledged that the welter of (often) highly sophisticated, diverse and comprehensive commentary discussing Matthew's intentions for his work makes it difficult to do it any real justice. My intention is to set out what emerged as key themes, and indeed paradoxes, on the basis of my own reading and initial understanding of the gospel, and pitch these more speculative comments into a long-standing and well-travelled set of debates about the gospel's significance and meaning.

In relation firstly to the context or circumstances within which Matthew was writing, Blomberg (1997) begins with a question which neatly prefigures what I argue later emerges (for me) as one of the main tensions or paradoxes within the account:

"What situation in the life of the early church would give rise to such a bewildering combination of seemingly pro- and anti-Jewish positions? (Blomberg 1997: 133)

His answer is to examine the situation within Judaism that would have provoked Matthew's distinctive treatment of Jesus and his ministry. While acknowledging that some commentators have argued that the target constituency for the gospel was a group of non-Christian Jews, he contends that 'most would agree' that it was in fact aimed at a Jewish-Christian community "*either on the verge of or just recovering from a substantial break from Judaism as a whole*" (ibid., his italics). France (1985) similarly believes we can be 'virtually certain' that the gospel was written in and for a 'church' - denoting a new community of Jesus' followers which to a large extent comprised converts from Judaism (1985: 27 - the word '*ekklesia*' is used twice in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17).

This is interesting and illustrative of some of the difficulties in actually tying down Matthew's precise purpose in writing the gospel, particularly because it does not necessarily adequately account for the fierce tone of some of the encounters between Jesus and the Jewish leaders that the writer includes - which might indicate that he still had an unbelieving and recalcitrant Jewish audience in mind. Matthew certainly seemed to be addressing a context replete with tensions caused by religious groups competing within the same communities for their own position as the true heirs to the Jewish

heritage, but France (*ibid.*) observes that it is much debated whether the relationship with Judaism reflected in the gospel is that of a disagreement between two distinct and hostile communities: between those who represent traditional Judaism, and the 'Nazarene' Jews now claiming to be the true Israel and "still hoping that the rest of the Jews may be won to recognize Jesus as Messiah" (1985: 29). What is generally acknowledged is that Matthew's is the most Jewish of the gospel narratives in that it illustrates Jewish sensibilities concerning terminology, frequently refers to matters of rabbinic debate, and assumes that its readers are familiar with Jewish customs, unlike Mark for example who, with a different audience in mind, explains such details in parentheses (Wenham and Walton 2001; Jackman 1997). Most modern scholars, according to France (1985) conclude that Matthew was written within the last twenty years of the first century: that its perceived 'anti-Jewish tone' suited the period around 85AD when Christians were effectively excluded from synagogue worship¹; and that there are possible allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD in certain passages (e.g. Matthew 22:7 the parable of the wedding banquet, 23:38 "See your house is left to you desolate", and parts of chapter 24 Green 2000: 38). It is a matter of debate as to whether the gospel was produced in Palestine or Antioch, Syria (see Streeter 1924: 500-523 cited in France 1985). What is important is the likelihood that its writing was directed by the concerns of a group of Jewish believers still acutely aware of their roots in Judaism and coping with a volatile situation both between themselves and their traditionalist religious counterparts and also between these fledgling groups and the incursions of an aggressive, imperialist Roman state.

Secondly, the structure of the gospel has been analysed in very different ways, none of which is generally agreed (Carson *et al*, 2000). Despite a consensus that Matthew is well organized and provides the most detailed and ordered account of the teachings of Jesus, 'it is by no means immediately apparent what the pattern...is' (Green 2000: 30). In Matthew 1:1 the gospel begins with the 'genesis' of God's purpose for Israel (the word used for genealogy²) and ends with culmination (28:20), the ushering in of a new age which encompasses the gentiles ('Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'). At its heart is the concept that Jesus supremely reveals the will of God in his teaching; that he is the person who 'embodies the new Torah'; and that the fulness of God's teaching is in the person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah (Weinandy October 24, 2002³). This has led some commentators to argue that the gospel is designed for and addressed to teachers:

"...I think we can imagine with some probability that Matthew's gospel was a manual for such people. It was a tool for the Christian scribe. These scribes were accredited by the Master himself. They were in line with the prophets of old. They were interns of Jesus the master rabbi, who had given them the keys to the mysteries of the kingdom (16:19)". (Green 2000: 28)

¹ According to France (1985: 28) this was accompanied by the insertion into the synagogue liturgy of the *Birkat ha-Minim* which cursed 'Nazarenes and heretics'.

² Schools lecture 25.10.02 David Wenham 'Matthew and the birth of Jesus' (The synoptic gospels and Matthew - series)

³ Schools lecture 24.10.02 Thomas Weinandy 'Jewish Christian development' (The Trinity to Nicea - series)

What lends weight to this view is that the writer clearly structured his material. Even a cursory reading indicates three main sections to the narrative: 1:1 - 4:16 sets out Jesus' credentials and preparation; 4:17 - 16:20 contains his life and ministry in Galilee; and 16:21 - 28:20 takes the story from Galilee to the cross, resurrection and ascension⁴. A more careful examination would recognise Matthew's organization of material around five substantial teaching discourses (some prefer the term 'sermons'), with the significance of the number five leading some to consider whether they might be part of a chiasmic structure⁵, or whether they are meant in some way to parallel the Pentateuch, particularly if chapter 13, as is generally thought, acts as a hinge or pivot point (i.e. within a chiasmic structure). Listing the discourses begins to lend some shape to Matthew's main emphases which are considered in more detail below. Following the aforementioned 'introduction' in 1-4, chapters 5-7 contain the 'sermon on the mount' or 'kingdom manifesto' (Jackman 1994); chapter 10 contains his instruction about mission for his disciples, the new emissaries of the kingdom; third (chapter 13) the series of parables which reveals or explains what this kingdom is like; fourth (chapter 18) is Jesus' teaching on life in the new kingdom community; and fifth (chapters 24 and 25) is his eschatological discourse on the future. The conclusions to the teaching episodes (each one a careful construction that condenses and summarises Jesus' teaching on particular matters) are clearly highlighted. To give two examples, Matthew 7:28 states: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things..." and 11:1 "Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities." (See also 13:53; 19:1 and 26:1). In other words there are clear boundary lines for what Jackman (1994) refers to as 'five great statements of divine revelation'.

Matthew also uses a number of other literary devices and formulae which act as signposts to alert the reader to his different intentions and emphases. He makes consistent use of antithesis by contrasting good fruit and evil fruit, obedience and disobedience, sand and rock as a basis for building, hearing/obeying and hearing/refusing to obey. But the main contrast is between true faith and the sham or pretence of the hypocrites (an expression of their complacency and the importance they attach to merely external expressions of piety) which Jesus confronts in chapters 11 - 20. Commentators also note other evidence of a meticulous organization of material. Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 are very similar compositions about Jesus teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing sickness and disease, illustrations of which then follow. But there are also other more intriguing possibilities connected with the hypothesis that Matthew's eye for careful design,

⁴Both Wenham and Walton (2001) and Blomberg (1997) refer to Kingbury's earlier (1975) structural observation *viz.* that Matthew uses the identical formula 'from that time on Jesus began to...' in 4:17 and 16:21 to separate the main phases of his adult ministry from the road to the cross. Hence a three way narrative division is created: an introduction in which Jesus' credentials as the fulfilment of the Messianic promise - from David's and indeed Abraham's line - are established, the body of his teaching and ministry, and the extended conclusion and climax.

⁵Kingdom>Mission of church>Kingdom ministry of Jesus and the church>Community life of the church>Failure of the kingdom (Wenham and Walton 2001: 213)

detail and symmetry would have meant that little of the presentation of his narrative was left to chance.

Given the significance of the number seven in Jewish thought, Wenham and Walton (2001) observe that Matthew's division of Old Testament history into three sections each comprising fourteen generations may be intended to point to Jesus as the seventh seven: the number of perfection, "with Jesus being the one who brings God's purposes and the world's into effect" (2001: 212). This would seem consistent with the writer's drive to present Jesus as the promised Messiah. Similar parallels are made by those commentators that contend that in Jesus we are faced with the new Moses who was about to lead a 'new exodus' the scale of which was hard to imagine in such a turbulent and troubled context. The possible significance of Matthew's use of numbers and balance is highlighted by Carson *et al* (2000) citing the following examples: the introduction/prologue (1:1-16, which is then summarised in verse 17); 8 beatitudes (5:3-10 which are concluded as introduced); 6 antitheses (5:21-48 with a recurring introductory formula); 3 types of religious observance (6:1-18 with a consistent structure); and 7 woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (23:13-16). So we might conclude from this brief consideration of structure and design that Matthew sets out with specific intentions in mind for his gospel. But what might be considered to be the main themes emerging out of the self-conscious design of his account?

Moving on, then, to the third concern of this essay, it has already been noted that a possible clue to the understanding of Matthew's distinctive emphasis is his clear interest in addressing his gospel to the Jews (whether believers or not) - although it is also apparent, despite the instructions to the disciples to confine and limit their ministry to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (a further distinguishing feature in 10:6 and 15:24), that the gentiles *are* now included in the fulfillment of the Messianic kingdom. But his use of the 'lost sheep' analogy gives a huge insight into Matthew's preoccupation to expose how hopelessly wrong the Pharisees and other powerful shapers of Jewish thinking had got it, and how angry and incensed he is that their portrayal of what faith should look like was such a travesty, sham and charade (see for example 12:6 when Jesus uses Hosea 6:6 to indicate to the Pharisees that something great was going on and they simply could not, or refused to, see it; or his rumbling anger at 'this evil generation' which places 'stumbling blocks' in the way of people believing - 12:45 and 18:6). Some commentators have, wrongly, characterized the gospel as being anti-Jewish on the basis of reading the vitriol in some of the narrative passages. These certainly denounce the Jewish leaders, especially but not solely the Pharisees, as 'blind guides' and 'hypocrites', and threaten that the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jews and given to others who will make better use of it (21:43). It envisages non-Jews brought in from east and west to the banquet in place of the discarded historical people of God (8:11; 22:1-10) although entrance to this feast, free and unexpected though it might be, is not without conditions (France 1989: 231). The gospel narrative also invokes judgment: things seem to have gone far enough, and the temple in particular is to be destroyed. Matthew is also the only one of the gospel writers who records: "Then

the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children'" (27:25). Carson *et al* (2000) observe that some writers have gone so far as to suggest that what Matthew is advocating is a complete disregard of the Jews in favour of incorporating the more responsive Gentiles. The inclusion of the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5-13) is interesting in this respect, not just for Jesus' praise for the quality of this gentile's faith, but for the fate of the erstwhile 'heirs of the kingdom' (8:12). As the momentum and intensity of the attack on such unbelief builds up through the account it is tempting to interpret Jesus' decision to 'get away' for a brief sortie over the border into Tyre and Sidon and his meeting with the Syro-Phoenician ('Canaanite') woman as a welcome break from having to confront the intransigence of the Pharisees!

But this alleged dismissiveness towards the Jews is perhaps going too far. Unlike the other gospel accounts, Matthew seems to relish seeking out connections between God's action in the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus. The invective he reserves for the Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law certainly may reflect Matthew's closeness to the target of Jesus' (and his own) criticism, but it is evident that his central, all-consuming message is that Jesus, the long awaited Messiah is indeed the fulfillment of Old Testament promise (Wenham and Walton 2000: 222). It is his repeated assertion that 'all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet...' i.e. that the whole of the Old Testament in anticipating his coming is really *all about* Jesus' mission, that defines and distinguishes his gospel account⁶. Commentators, of course, have expressed their reservations about Matthew's confident and free use of Old Testament texts:

"They are, in a bizarre way, taken out of context. How can he do such a thing? Simply because he believes so strongly in the unity of revelation...It may look like a misuse of the Old Testament, but actually it is not. It is a profound way of saying that the God who has revealed himself in the ancient scriptures has now given a full and final disclosure of himself in Jesus...The time of fulfillment is come." (Green 2000: 42)

But the heart-breaking honesty of Jesus' grief at Israel's hard-heartedness seems to gather up all the harshness of the interplay between himself and the leaders he has been taking to task throughout in what Jackman (1994) aptly describes as the saddest words in the whole gospel:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See the house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:37-39)

In many senses the other interlinking themes which it is possible to identify within the gospel are all, arguably, connected with the central theme of Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets: themes of practical obedience and judgment (and his teaching about a 'higher righteousness'); of Jesus' kingship and authority; of kingdom and Christology; and even of the requirements for the behaviour of the new church. In other words there are other possibilities

⁶ See for example Matthew 1:22; 2:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 17; 21:4; 23; 27:9

regarding Matthew's use of Old Testament scripture than the charge of arbitrary un-contextual use. Matthew actually sees the story of the Old Testament, including the exodus, as the foreshadowing of Jesus whom he sees as the completion of the story (Wenham 2002 op cit. - Schools lecture). This theme of fulfillment is highlighted because, on re-reading the gospel narrative, the tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is palpable and his reaction to them, particularly in relation to their obstinate dismissiveness about his authority, is volatile and passionate (no calm detachment evident here!). The ubiquity of these episodes in the account goes some way to explaining Matthew's great pains to present the theological case for Jesus as the true Israel. Indeed it is Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ (16:16), to Wenham and Walton's minds, that acts as the turning point - the interpretive key within the text - which illuminates the meaning and purpose of the writing. Even on the cross Jesus is mocked as the failed king of Israel, paradoxically achieving his true destiny as king over all things. His true identity is declared at the beginning: Emmanuel - God with us (1:23), and by himself at the end: 'I am with you always' (28:20). Thus Matthew allows us to see in Jesus one who, while never less than the Messiah of Israel, is yet far more" (Carson *et al* 2000: 906).

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