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An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts

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poor and further exploitation of those who most need protecting. Claiming that God's reign has come in the surprising life, death, and promised resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark is meant to inspire faithfulness and enduring obedience, even in the face of very legitimate—and very Roman—fears.

3

Matthew's Story

The Gospel in Jewish Contexts

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW WAS probably the second Gospel written even though it is first in the NT canon. Matthew relies heavily on Mark's account, using 90 percent of Mark's material and following Mark's order, but adding significantly to Jesus's lineage, birth, teaching, and resurrection. Matthew shortens several of Mark's more detailed stories, removes some potentially embarrassing ones, and sometimes doubles the numbers Jesus heals (cf. Matt 8:28–33, 9:20–22, 27–31 with Mark 5:1–20, 24–34, 8:22–26). Matthew also has a more intrusive narrator who offers explicit OT quotations to clarify Jesus's teachings and actions. As a result, Matthew's Gospel is, in many ways, more straightforward than Mark's brief, cryptic account. It is unsurprising that Matthew came to be the favorite Gospel of many in the early Christian movement, thus leading to its place at the front of the NT.

This chapter will proceed in the same manner as our last chapter on Mark. I will start with an overview of basic information before delving more deeply into the world behind Matthew. I will then explore the Gospel's literary features and engage with key passages and themes from the book. The Roman imperial context of Judea and Palestine that was the focus of the previous chapter is relevant to Matthew's Gospel as well. This chapter will deepen our understanding by investigating the so-called Jewishness of the Gospel of Matthew in light of first-century Jewish expressions and practices.[1]

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CONTEXTUALIZING THE COMPOSITION

The Basics: Authorship, Date, and Location

Unlike any other canonical Gospel, the traditional author for the "Gospel according to Matthew" is named in this story, even though he is not explicitly identified as its author. The Matthew to whom the writing is attributed is found in 9:9–17. Walking by, Jesus sees a "man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.'" Matthew, like the fishermen in 4:18–20 and the scribe in 8:19–20, obediently follows Jesus and even hosts him at his home that evening. Matthew's occupation is clarified in the controversy that follows; he is not just any man at a tax collector's booth, he is a tax collector! He benefited from the Roman imperial systems by collecting taxes on the empire's behalf, as well as taking a share for himself.[2] Matthew was not considered a righteous man when Jesus called on him to be a disciple (9:10–17), but as a disciple, Matthew finds himself included even in the Gospel's prestigious list of the Twelve in 10:1–4 (cf. Mark 3:18).

Although not righteous, Matthew would have been literate, perhaps explaining the early attribution to him. Early Christian traditions from the second century onward all assign a writing to him, often commenting on its composition in Hebrew. Eusebius records Papias's explanation: "Matthew wrote the oracles (*logia*) in the Hebrew language, and everyone interpreted them as he was able" (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.16). Irenaeus writes, "Matthew also issued a gospel for the Hebrews in their own dialect" (*Haer.* 3.1.1). Yet the Gospel of Matthew shows no signs of having been translated into Greek from Hebrew (or Aramaic), as the LXX does. This association with Hebrew, however, indicates that this Gospel's "Jewishness" was something recognized and perpetuated very early on.

Most contemporary scholars do not think Matthew the tax collector was the author of this Gospel. Instead, some argue the author was a "scribe," partly due to the reference to the "scribe of heaven" in Matt 13:52. This background could explain the extensive use of the OT in Matthew, as well as its common imitation of biblical style. Moreover, Matthew's Gospel does report the inclusion of at least one scribe among Jesus's followers (8:19–20), even if other Jewish religious leaders are portrayed negatively. As with the authorship of the other canonical Gospels, however, recovering the exact author of this work is complicated by the contrast between ancient understandings of authorship and contemporary expectations. Instead of composing the Gospel in its entirety, Matthew could be an authority standing behind these traditions as an eyewitness. Some scholars propose that Matthew's Gospel is the result of a school of disciples who collected, composed, and edited traditions about Jesus for their community's needs.[3] More recently, scholars have pushed against the narrowness of these hypotheses, suggesting a more widespread audience or even a missionary intent for the work (28:19–20).[4] Generally, however, most interpreters emphasize a Jewish-Christian context for the Gospel.

Regardless of the actual author and first audiences of Matthew, this Gospel was composed after the Gospel of Mark; a range between 80 and 100 CE would give the Gospel of Mark time to travel and be interpreted. Many interpreters also advocate an urban setting for Matthew's Gospel that included a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, such as Antioch of Syria.[5] Antioch was an important center for the developing Christian movement and, after the First Jewish War, gained even more significance after Jerusalem's destruction. Like other Roman cities, however, non-Jewish residents of Antioch harbored significant and sometimes violent antagonism for Jews. Riots broke out in the latter half of the first century, during and after the First Jewish War, as Romans reacted negatively to the Jewish revolt.[6] Gentiles called for the revocation of the exemption that allowed Jews to avoid participating in the emperor cult. Instead, Emperor Vespasian taxed the Jews (*fiscus Judaicus*), taking from them the money they would have sent to the temple in Jerusalem to finance a temple to Jupiter in Rome.

The violence faced by Jews, as well as the imposition of a new tax, would have strained the Jewish community in Antioch,

particularly if there were a growing group of Jesus-followers in their midst. This might explain some of the anti-Jewish language and characterizations in Matthew. Matthew, like Mark, does not support the First Jewish War, but repeats Jesus's admonitions for believers to flee from Jerusalem when conflict approaches (Matt 24:15–28). Matthew also describes the inclusion of Gentiles with Jesus's Great Commission at the end of the Gospel (28:19). The combination of not supporting the revolt, anti-Jewish biases already present in the Roman world, and the growing number of Gentiles connected to the early Jesus movement contributed to the process we call the "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity. Jesus-followers of Jewish and Gentile descent who did not want (or could not afford) to pay the *fiscus Judaicus* could have pushed this separation further, not knowing the danger it would cause in later years for themselves as well.[7]

Whatever the precise situation that prompted the composition of Matthew's Gospel, the conflict between the Jews who believed Jesus to be the Christ and those who did not is palpable in this story, often resulting in shockingly negative portrayals of Jewish leaders. Matthew's story justifies the Jesus-following Jews (and Gentiles) over and against nonbelieving Jews, highlighting the Jewish nature of Jesus's teaching and ministry even while incorporating language of division and judgment against those who reject him (e.g., 23:1–39, 27:24–25). This context makes the attribution of such a Gospel to a one-time tax collector even more extraordinary in Christian tradition, even if it is ultimately not correct.

Digging Deeper: Jews/Judeans in the First Century

Although we use the term "Jewish" primarily to denote religious expression, ancient Greco-Roman contexts did not have such an understanding. Instead, the word we translate "Jew" simultaneously means "Judean," as in someone either from Judea or descended from Judeans. Along with this ethnic identity were assumed

religious practices and beliefs—monotheism, male circumcision, dietary laws, and sabbath observance, to name a few—but there were no credal commitments in the same way that contemporary Christians or Muslims have. In the ancient Mediterranean world, religion was primarily a practice (what one did and did not do) based on your ethnic and social identity. People worshiped whomever and however their father, master, or husband did rather than *choosing* for themselves.[8]

Jewish practices necessarily shifted after the destruction of the First Temple and exile (ca. 587/586 BCE), since the temple (and priests) no longer functioned to enact atonement on behalf of the people. Judeans met, instead, in synagogues as places of prayer, study, and business and family connections. In exile, Judeans faced pressures to conform to the dominant cultures that surrounded them, as the stories of Ezekiel and Daniel illustrate. Even with the return to the land, various groups debated how much Jews could assimilate or resist non-Jewish customs. For Ezra, the separation was absolute: no intermarriage with non-Judeans, and existing ties must be severed (Ezra 10:1–44). For the authors of Second Isaiah, though, God could use even a Persian (and polytheistic) king named Cyrus to bring about deliverance (Isa 44:28). These prior debates over assimilation and resistance offer a helpful lens for understanding the main Jewish groups in the first century CE as well.

Readers of the NT encounter several Jewish groups interacting with Jesus and his followers. Many of these interactions are hostile, establishing the Jewish religious leaders of various stripes as more or less consistent opposition to Jesus's ministry. When we read these exchanges, however, it is crucial that we *contextualize* them, remembering the agendas of our NT authors, their historical situations, and the larger situation of Jews/Judeans in the first century Roman Empire. Instead of thinking of ancient Judaism as a homogenous religion, we should instead think of being Jewish (or Israelite) as being part of a people, whose actual practices and beliefs spanned a spectrum. Debates, sometimes very heated,

existed between groups, but they often (though not always) regarded each other as part of the people of God regardless, especially when a common enemy, such as Rome, was involved. Finally, only those who had the leisure to think deeply or participate in systems of power had the time to determine to which smaller group or "school of thought"[9] they belonged. The vast majority of Jews were like the rest of the peasants and poor in the Roman Empire: they were simply trying to get by.

Jewish Schools of Thought in the First Century

Pharisees are probably the best-known Jewish group from the NT, largely because Jesus regularly finds himself in conflict with them in Galilean synagogues. According to Josephus, they were also the most popular group among the people and had some historical alliances with the Herodian family.[10] The Pharisees are the rabbis, or teachers, of ancient synagogues, and they had the responsibility of helping Jews far outside of Jerusalem figure out how to live faithfully in a Gentile world. Although Pharisees supported the temple, they extended holiness to daily practices meant to create a "fence around the law."[11] The fence was made up of "light" laws surrounding the "heavy," or most important laws, such as the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21). Keeping the lighter laws prevented breaking a weightier one. Yet forgiveness and atonement were available through the temple and individual prayers, like those reflected in the Psalms. Because of their desire to provide guidelines for daily living, the Pharisees collected "traditions of the elders" and considered writings outside of the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) authoritative. Of all the groups, Jesus appears *most* like a Pharisee. This is especially true of the Gospel of Matthew, which also includes scribes among its community (8:19–20, 13:52).

Their creation of writings, as well as their study of Torah, means Pharisees are often connected to *scribes* in the NT. Being a scribe was a profession in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Since most people did not read or write, scribes were specifically trained to use ink, pens (styli), and papyrus to record events, copy manuscripts, take dictation, or even create compositions for clients. In Jewish contexts, scribes are especially associated with the sacred writing that is Scripture. As the recorders and keepers of these writings, scribes knew passages in detail. When Jesus engages a scribe in interpretation, it is with someone who knows Scripture intimately.

Sadducees are another common group in the NT. Connected to the temple in Jerusalem, Sadducees were most often priests from Levitical families, including high priests (Luke 10:32; John 1:19; Acts 4:36). Sadducees competed with the Pharisees for dominance in the Hasmonean period and came to occupy the key negotiating position with Rome because they were the caretakers of the Jerusalem temple. The temple was not only the most important religious site for Jews in the first century, but also a place of significant financial import, collecting taxes and exchanging currency for worshipers and Roman governors alike. For this reason, Josephus presents the Sadducees as the aristocratic class, disliked by the majority of Jews because of their perceived coziness with the Romans.[12]

The Sadducees focused on the Jerusalem temple as the location of God's presence, and on the practice of rituals there to maintain the relationship between the people of Israel and their God.[13] For the Sadducees, God's revelation was offered in the Torah only, which emphasizes the temple cult in connection to Israel's inhabiting the Promised Land. Deuteronomy, in particular, stresses the need to worship in Jerusalem only, as well as insisting both that Israel's eventual expulsion from the land was their fault *and* that God alone is gracious to restore them (Deuteronomy 29–30). From the Sadducees' perspective, God's forgiveness resulted in a return to the land (Ezra–Nehemiah), and they were committed to maintaining the temple to keep this return permanent, even if it meant cooperating with Romans.

Essenes do not appear explicitly in the NT, but Josephus presents them as an ascetic group that separated itself from other Jews in an attempt to keep more strict purity practices. Rather than elitists, Josephus depicts the Essenes as a humble community, whose high standards should be respected. The Essenes were made up of fewer Jews, but they were committed to separating from Roman polytheistic influences.[14] In fact, the community that settled at Qumran near the Dead Sea was probably Essenes who had taken an extreme position against the temple and Sadducees. These Essenes differ from those whom Josephus describes, however, with their polemic against the temple and anticipation of God's imminent eschatological intervention. Some scholars find points of similarity between the apocalyptic views of the NT Gospels and those reflected in several Qumran scrolls, especially *The War Scroll*.[15]

Additional Jewish Groups in the NT Gospels and Acts

Several other groups mentioned in the NT Gospels and Acts are not recognized schools of thought. Members of these groups could also belong to any of the schools above, none at all, or reflect a mixture of perspectives.

Although called the "fourth philosophy" or "school" by Josephus, the *zealots* were not an organized group.[16] Instead, "zeal" has a long history in Judaism, and is often portrayed as a positive trait in OT and Jewish literature (Num 25:11; Ps 69:9; 1 Macc 2:54–58). In general, a zealot could be anyone who was inspired to defend God's honor, even violently. In the first century CE, some specific zealot groups emerged, in addition to the general brigands who roamed the countryside and attacked without clear theological motivation. Josephus describes a group established by Judas the Galilean who declared God alone was King. These zealots promoted the First Jewish War, moving from Galilee south to Jerusalem while attacking Romans, brigands, and other Jews. Another zealot group, the Sicarii ("dagger men"), focused on

urban areas, such as Jerusalem, assassinating other Jews who they believed were too closely aligned with Rome. Some suggest it was this group that fled Jerusalem early on in the First Jewish War and met their end with the fall at Masada in 73 CE.

The *Herodians* were aligned with Herod the Great's household (Matt 22:16; Mark 3:6, 12:13). Herod maintained power in Judea from 37 BCE to 4 BCE as the client-king of Rome, and his family had some position of authority in the region until the end of the first century CE. Herod's accommodations to Roman culture were many, including building monuments and cities in honor of emperors. This fact, combined with disputes over his Judean ancestry (his father was an Edomite)[17] and heavy taxation, meant Herod was not a well-loved king. Those who did ally themselves with Herod and his family, however, benefited from that relationship. These Jews were loyal to Herod's successors as well. Figure 3.1 illustrates how Herod the Great's territory was divided among his successors after his death. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea (r. 4 BCE–39 CE), while Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea for only a few years (r. 4 BCE–6 CE). When Archelaus's hold on Judea slipped, Rome sent in a governor (or "procurator") to take his place. Pontius Pilate was assigned to this post from 26 to 36 CE. Herod's other descendants were more successful, including Herod Philip the Tetrarch in Batanea (r. 4 BCE–34 CE), and Herod Agrippa I of Judea (r. 41–44 CE). Herod Agrippa II's reign lasted from around 48 to 93 CE but was disjointed due to the sudden death of his father (Acts 12) as well as the First Jewish War (66–73 CE). It is to Herod Agrippa II that Paul testifies in Acts 26.[18] Keeping the Herods mentioned in the NT sorted is a challenge! Matthew's blending of Herods after his initial description of Herod the Great demonstrates his overall disdain for this dynasty (Matt 2:1–23, 14:1–12).

The *Sanhedrin* was a council of Jewish leaders who had some legal authority prior to 70 CE. There are conflicting accounts of its composition. In the NT, the Sanhedrin is made up of Sadducees and Pharisees, thus leading to Paul's ability to divide them on the

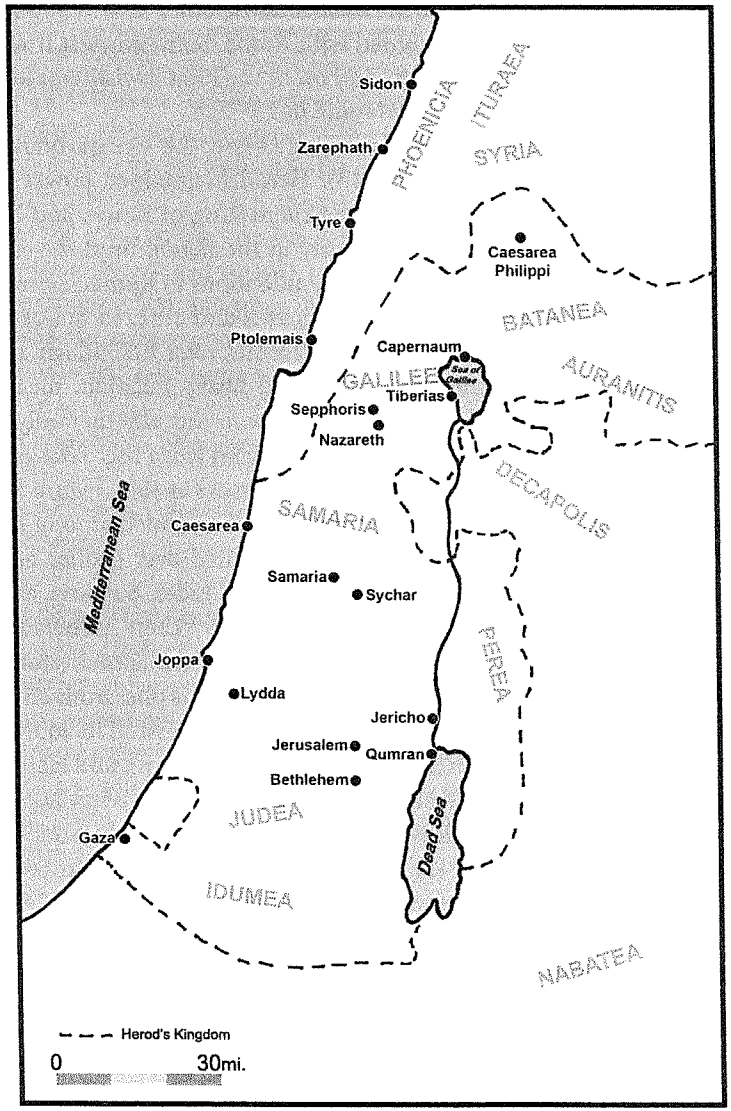

FIGURE 3.1 The Division of Herod the Great's Kingdom.

issue of resurrection in Acts 23:6–10. According to Josephus, however, the Sanhedrin was an impermanent body that formed at the will of the high priest when he deemed it necessary. In rabbinic tradition, the Sanhedrin is composed only of Pharisees, or rabbis, from the time period. Whatever the group's composition, they were subject to Roman oversight even if the Romans gave them some leeway in judicial matters. The diversity of presentations means we should be careful about assuming the depiction of this group in the NT is entirely accurate, particularly since these writings were largely completed *after* the First Jewish War, when the Sanhedrin ceased to exist.

Samaritans were not considered "Judean" or "Jewish" by other Jews in the first century. They were the inhabitants of the land between Judea (southern Palestine) and Galilee (northern Palestine). Although they too worshiped only one God and had a collection of Scriptures similar to the Torah called the "Samaritan Pentateuch," the Samaritans did not recognize the Jerusalem temple as authoritative. Instead, they worshiped at a temple on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, which was established after the destruction of the first Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians. Samaritans argued that they, unlike the exiled Judeans, maintained the covenant in the land during the exile. According to Jews, however, the Samaritans were not *real* Jews because they married non-Jews during the exile. When the Jews from Babylon returned, they did not acknowledge the Samaritans as legitimate Israelites. This tension led to violent encounters between Jews and Samaritans, especially as Galileans passed through Samaria to travel to and from Jerusalem.

The final group I will mention here is the *Jesus-followers*, the earliest of those who would come to be called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). Jesus and his very first followers, were Jewish. According to the NT, many of them were Galileans, fishermen, tax collectors, and women who supported the group (Luke 8:1–3, 10:34–37; John 11:1–12:8). Others are described as Pharisees even after they became disciples of Jesus and his apostles. Paul is the most famous example, but there is a group of Pharisees mentioned among the

believers in Acts 15:5. Even though Christianity is a separate religion today, in the first century and into the beginnings of the second, Jesus-followers were part of the broad spectrum of Jews. This is why questions about dietary laws, sabbath observance, and circumcision were so crucial for the early Jesus movement. Had "Christianity" been separate from the beginning, there would have been no reason for such debates.[19]

The Gospel of Matthew, like the other NT Gospels, should be read as a Jewish writing from the Roman Empire. Matthew is debating how, *not* if, one should follow the God of Israel, by arguing that Jesus is God's chosen Christ. This Gospel is explicit about its connection to Israel's Scriptures, imitating biblical style by beginning with a genealogy (1:1–17) and integrating scriptural quotations, allusions, and references throughout. Often Matthew uses "fulfillment introductions" just before quoting Scripture (1:22, 2:15, 17, 23, 4:14, etc.). In this way, Matthew interprets Jesus's actions as the *continuation* and *fulfillment* of Israel's covenant with YHWH and not as the beginning of a new religion.

LITERARY OVERVIEW

Matthew's literary style differs from Mark's even as it incorporates the majority of Markan material. Matthew often presents events or ideas in threes, a significant number not only in Jewish contexts, but also in rhetorical circles because it added emphasis and aided memory. Matthew reduces the number of *inclusios* from Mark's account, preferring instead to move straight through stories to avoid delays in Jesus's actions or responses to his words (cf. Matt 21:18–19; Mark 11:12–26). Many scholars also note Matthew's rotation between narrative episodes and speeches throughout the Gospel. Read this way, the Gospel divides into six portions of narrative and five speeches:

Narrative 1: Jesus's beginnings (1:1–4:25)
  Speech 1: Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
Narrative 2: Miraculous works (8:1–9:38)
  Speech 2: Missionary instructions (10:1–11:1)
Narrative 3: Conflict stories (11:2–12:50)
  Speech 3: Teaching in parables (13:1–53)
Narrative 4: Responses to Jesus (13:54–17:27)
  Speech 4: Living in community (18:1–19:1)
Narrative 5: Jesus in Jerusalem (19:2–23:39)
  Speech 5: Looking for the end (24:1–25:46)
Narrative 6: Death, resurrection, and commission (26:1–28:20)

Jesus's five speeches parallel Moses's five books in the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) as part of a larger comparison between Moses and Jesus in the Gospel. The rotation also highlights Jesus's teachings on various topics as the story progresses. Jesus's discourses often correspond to the events that precede them while setting the stage for what is to come. The Gospel ends with an expanded narrative section describing Jesus's resurrection, the aftermath in Jerusalem, and his commissioning the disciples in Galilee. Unlike Mark, Matthew makes Jesus's resurrection explicit, even providing the story of a cover-up when the Jewish leaders pay off the Roman guards who witnessed it (27:62–28:15). As elsewhere in this Gospel, Matthew brings clarity to what Mark left obscure. Matthew culminates with Jesus's words, spoken again on a mountaintop, encouraging his followers to "go discipling all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (28:19–20, my translation). With Jesus's ministry complete, the disciples are to carry his message forward.

While the outline above is helpful, it can obscure the plot progression of the Gospel by focusing only on types of prose. A second outline below clarifies the storyline:

Origins and preparation (1:1–4:11)
- Genealogy: Jesus's human lineage (1:1–17)
- Miraculous beginnings: establishing Jesus as God's Son (1:18–2:23)
- Transition to adulthood: opposition and God's declaration (3:1–4:11)

Jesus's ministry as the prophetic Messiah (4:12–20:34)
- John's arrest and the beginning of Jesus's ministry (4:12–11:1)
- John's death and reminders of Jesus's beginnings (11:2–14:12)
- A good King: Jesus's provision and compassion (14:13–16:12)
- Peter's confession and turning toward Jerusalem (16:13–20:34)

Fulfillment in Jerusalem and return to Galilee (21:1–28:20)
- Entrance and temple teachings (21:1–25:46)
- Plot enacted: final meals, betrayal, and death (26:1–27:66)
- Resurrection and return to Galilee (28:1–20)

This outline shows that most of Matthew centers on Jesus's teaching, healing, and traveling throughout Galilee. Jesus also prepares his disciples, sending them to teach to "the lost sheep of Israel" (10:5–15) and telling them how to live as a community (18:1–19:1). Rather than focusing mainly on Jesus's passion and death, as Mark does, Matthew highlights the importance of Jesus's life, not only as verifying his identity as God's Christ, but also as containing crucial lessons for followers.

Other significant features in Matthew include the lingering importance of John the Baptist (3:1, 11:11–12, 14:2–8, 16:14, 17:13), God's intervention through dreams of both Jews and Gentiles (1:20, 2:12–13, 19, 22, 27:19), and the use of "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than "Kingdom of God." There is also persistent tension between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders, whom Jesus accuses of hypocrisy (esp. Matthew 23). Alongside these conflicts, Jesus regularly includes judgment scenes in his parables and teachings, describing both eternal life and eternal fire (5:22, 13:40, 42, 50, 18:8–9, 25:41), or "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:12, 13:42, 50, 22:13, 24:15, 25:30). According to the Matthean Jesus, daily living should conform to God's will, and everyone will be accountable for their behavior at the Day of Judgment. Although this is difficult for modern readers, it conforms to prophetic teaching, especially in the Book of the Twelve (Hosea–Malachi) and Jewish apocalyptic texts. This aspect of Jesus's teaching is part of the larger interpretation that he fulfills God's promises to Israel. In this Gospel, Jesus is a new Moses, a prophet, and the Son of David. The Gospel urges its audience to take their knowledge of Jesus and his teachings to all the nations, so that many can be blessed by the coming of God's reign (12:18–21, 24:14, 25:42, 28:19).

KEY PASSAGES AND THEMES

Jesus's Origins: Genealogy and Birth (1:1–2:23)

Matthew's Gospel starts with a section most of us probably would just as soon skip: a genealogy. By beginning this way, however, Matthew imitates well-known biblical style from Israel's Scriptures. A quick glance through the books of the OT reveals the common use of genealogies. Matthew begins with the phrase: "A book of the origin (*geneseōs*) of Jesus Christ, Son of David, son of Abraham" (my translation). The word for "origin" can also be translated as "beginning" or "genealogy." It is so common in the book of Genesis that the Greek version of the book was named after it: *genesis*! Matthew uses this word again at 1:18, just after Jesus's genealogy, thereby creating two parallel "beginnings" for Jesus's story: one

that starts with his genealogy (1:1–17) and one that records the story of his birth (1:18–23).

Although a bit boring for us—and daunting to read aloud—the first seventeen verses of Matthew's Gospel are carefully arranged: they tie the promises God made to Abraham and David to "Jesus Christ" (Gen 22:15–19; 2 Samuel 7) and form the foundation for Matthew's larger argument that God's promises are fulfilled by Jesus. Matt 1:1–17 falls into three equal subsections corresponding to the titles given to Jesus in 1:1. Verse 17 repeats the genealogy to highlight the important names one more time, while also making sure everyone knows there are fourteen generations between each era. Here's what it looks like:

Introduction: Jesus Christ, Son of David, son of Abraham (v. 1)

A. From Abraham to David (vv. 2–6a)
B. From David to Exile (vv. 6b–11)
C. From Exile to Christ (vv. 12–16)

Summary: fourteen generations each (v. 17)

A′. Abraham to David (v. 17a)
B′. David to Exile (v. 17b)
C′. Exile to Christ (v. 17c)

The results of the careful construction are multiple. First, it emphasizes Jesus's connection to key figures in Israel's past. Certainly, this includes Abraham and David, but also all the people mentioned in each generation. If the audience knew their Jewish history, these names would evoke entire stories and episodes of God's faithfulness. Second, the balance of fourteen generations indicates God's involvement, guiding history to the moment of Jesus's birth as the Christ. Third, the genealogy especially emphasizes royal elements of Jesus's messiahship, since the number fourteen is the sum of the Hebrew letters that spell David's

name. The name "David" has three letters in Hebrew: DVD (דוד). When added together, the letters equal fourteen (4 + 6 + 4 = 14).

One more characteristic of Matthew's genealogy must be mentioned: namely, his inclusion of five women. While this seems sparse to us, it is surprising that Matthew included any women at all (cf. Genesis 5, 6, 10, 11, 25, etc.). Moreover, the women included are also surprising: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the "wife of Uriah" (aka Bathsheba), and Mary. As many commentators note, all these women have culturally ambiguous sexual experiences.[20] Tamar tricks Judah into having sex with her so she can have children (Genesis 38); Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho (Joshua 2); Ruth was a Moabitess, who were often depicted as sinful seductresses; the "wife of Uriah" was not David's wife, but was raped and her husband murdered by David (2 Sam 11–12); and Mary, whose own conception of Jesus comes into question in Matt 1:18–23. Yet, in spite of these situations, all these women are shown righteous by their actions in contrast to the men who oppress them. Not only do these women reveal how assumptions can be deceiving, but also how, for Matthew, God finds a way to sculpt history despite the failures of those in power: God uses surprising means to upend expectations.

Resuming the "beginning" again, Matt 1:18–23 focuses on Jesus's conception and birth. Although the narrator has clearly identified Jesus in his genealogy, Joseph needs divine intervention to prevent him from divorcing Mary after learning of her untimely pregnancy (1:18–19). With a tactic that repeats at the beginning and end of this Gospel, Matthew describes dreams received first by Joseph (1:20–21), then by the three astrologers ("magi"; 2:12), and Joseph again to secure Jesus's safety during infancy (2:13–23). At the end of the Gospel, Pilate's wife has a divinely given dream, though she and Pilate do not respond rightly to it (27:19). In Matthew 2, Herod is a clear threat to Jesus's life, but Joseph is actually the *first* threat to him: if Mary had been divorced, not only would Jesus's life have been endangered for lack of care, but he would not have been integrated into the Davidic line (1:16).[21] Joseph is assuaged

by the "angel of the Lord," who tells him: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:20–21). It is interesting that the "fear" Joseph has is over marriage to Mary rather than of the angel's appearance! Like the other men in Jesus's genealogy, Joseph is in danger of acquiescing to cultural pressures rather than seeing how God works outside of them.

In Matthew, there are three participants in Jesus's conception and birth: a "Holy Spirit" (i.e., God) who begets; Mary, who conceives, gestates, and bears; and Joseph, who names. In spite of her crucial role, Mary is silent throughout Matthew's account and never explicitly *agrees* to be God's chosen vessel. Matthew's focus on Joseph (and other male perspectives) throughout the birth narrative is in keeping with the largely male vantage point of the genealogy. But that vantage point is also undercut by the inclusion of the women mentioned above and whispers of Mary's actions. For Matthew, God is not limited by cultural expectations. Thus, from the outset, Jesus is set up to be a paradoxical figure: he is both the fulfillment of God's long-ordained plan of salvation and also the one who continues God's countercultural methods that bring this plan to completion. At the end of the Gospel, women are again the trusted messengers of God's actions when they obey the risen Jesus's instructions to tell the male disciples of his resurrection (28:1–10).

The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)

Jesus communicates his paradoxical teaching in speeches throughout the Gospel. As noted above, Jesus gives five speeches in this Gospel, which are collections of sayings rather than actual speeches following rhetorical standards of the day. These collections are arranged topically and, accordingly, can feel fragmented and unfocused to contemporary readers. Slowing down, however, we can see the linking words and themes that flow through these collections and help us have a better understanding of Matthew's interpretation of Jesus's instructions.

Of all the collections of sayings in Matthew, none is as well known as the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5–7. This sermon stands out for several reasons: it is both a synopsis of Jesus's teachings and a precursor of future conflicts he will have with religious leaders over scriptural interpretation. It also includes pithy sayings that are memorable outside of their specific context within the sermon. As with the other discourses, Jesus's sayings are put together topically, with the result that Matthew 5–7 resembles works such as Proverbs, James, or other Jewish wisdom literature more than it does a sermon. The following outline highlights the collection's topical flow:

5:1–2. Mountaintop setting
5:3–16. Unusual blessings: the character of disciples
5:17–48. Completion: Jesus's relationship to the Law
6:1–34. Fast, give, and pray with trust rather than fear
7:1–27. Living sincerely: the Golden Rule
7:28–29. Conclusion

The mountaintop setting of 5:1–2 is often compared to Moses's reception of God's revelation on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19–24). At the beginning of Exodus 19, God promises Israel, saying, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:5–6). In many ways, it is at Sinai that Israel is born. Mirroring this moment, Jesus too forms a people for God at the mountain in Matthew 5–7. For Matthew, Jesus is like Moses but greater, since he issues commands from the mountain's peak, the same location where Moses met with the Lord, rather than from the bottom, where Moses teaches (Exod 24:1–2). Jesus's teaching, therefore, seems to come directly from God. Jesus's turn to interpret many of the Mosaic laws (Torah) makes sense in this

narrative context. Jesus extends the Torah to become even more strict in order to reinforce its intentions of love and mercy, rather than undercutting them. For Matthew, those who follow Jesus's instructions have an intimate relationship with God, becoming children in God's household. This new household is more important than any human community and is also more trustworthy because God is at its head.

Overall, Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount emphasizes sincere discipleship that focuses on the "Father in heaven" regardless of the trials, persecutions, temptations, and scarcity oppressing the audience. According to Jesus, this sincerity is the true meaning of the Law and the prophets, another way to refer to Israel's Scriptures (Matt 5:17–20, 7:12). Disciples whose focus is on the heavenly Father will not fear sharing the good news in spite of danger—social or otherwise—and they will not seek rewards from people, but rather live with true faith (5:11–13). Such faith is not just cognitive assent, but results in daily actions, some of which were risky in the first century and today. Jesus gives specific examples to ground his theological and ethical concepts: disciples will not curse others, objectify and use women, seek revenge, or even defend themselves against attack (5:21–42). Instead, like good children, disciples should imitate their Father by loving enemies (5:43–48). So great is a disciple's trust of this Father that everything can be risked for the sake of heavenly rewards.

We should be careful to observe that Jesus's instructions target free men rather than women, children, or slaves. In this way, they parallel much of Jewish literature and Torah interpretations that focus on the obligations of Israelite men rather than everyone attached to them. The assumption is that if the leader of a household lives as Jesus instructs, all those in his care will benefit. The disciples described by Jesus do not take advantage of those in their care or those they could exploit; instead, they focus on what their heavenly Father desires: authentic righteousness exemplified by love and mercy. Thus, the heavenward focus of Jesus's teaching does not result in a detachment from the world, but a readjustment of one's

relationship to it. Rather than following human standards and fears of scarcity that lead people to fulfill selfish desires, Jesus's disciples are to trust in their Father's bountiful provision. This does not mean these disciples will never suffer or mourn; Jesus tells them that they will, but that they will be blessed for it. For Matthew, such suffering and mourning will ultimately be balanced with heavenly rewards from their Father, and Jesus himself acts as the primary example for the disciples to follow.

Matthew's Other Characters: A Mixed Reception

The other characters who interact with, or hear about, Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew are challenged by his vision of faithful living. Jesus's teaching is similar in Mark and Luke, but Matthew presents those challenged by Jesus's teachings in a unique way: offering both a more generous presentation of Jesus's disciples and a more polemical one of his opponents, particularly Jewish leaders. This contrast creates a paradox in Matthew: it is considered the most Jewish of the canonical Gospels, but it contains some of the harshest language against the Jews, even statements that have been used by Christians to justify anti-Jewish policies and violence (esp. Matt 27:25).[22] How can this be?

All of Jesus's earliest, and closest, disciples in Matthew are Galilean Jews of various socioeconomic classes. While these people regularly struggle to understand Jesus's actions and words, Matthew presents them as moving from initial confusion to comprehension at key moments in the story. In the last chapter, I used Mark's version of the Parable of the Sower to analyze other characters in that Gospel. Jesus tells this parable in Matthew as well, but instead of reprimanding his disciples for not understanding, Jesus praises the disciples. After quoting Isa 6:9–10, Jesus says: "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it"

(Matt 13:16–17). The disciples, then, do not seem to be the same "rocky soil" they were in Mark (cf. Mark 8 with Matthew 16). This presentation perhaps encouraged the Matthean audiences to trust in their leadership, who may have been connected to this first group of disciples. Matthew's message also encourages its audience to trust that despite their own initial misunderstandings, they too would come to understand and be blessed.

In contrast to this generous characterization, Matthew is particularly polemical toward those in power, especially Jewish leaders. Matthew includes stories of Herod the Great's attempts to kill Jesus, and his massacre of infants (2:1–18), as well as the story of Herod Antipas's unjust execution of John the Baptist (14:1–12). Both men occupy thrones as client kings, but neither enacts justice; instead, their fear of losing power leads them to violence, killing rather than protecting those in their care. Jewish religious leaders are likewise characterized negatively in Matthew. While the rare scribe may come to follow Jesus, most leaders are classified as "hypocrites"—the Greek word for an actor, one who pretends to be someone else and hides behind a mask (6:2, 5, 16, 22:18). In Matthew 23 Jesus takes special pains to underscore his distrust of the scribes and Pharisees (23:1–36). Matthew 23–25 includes Jesus's final series of teachings in the temple before his arrest and execution. Here, Jesus foretells judgment against the religious leaders as well as against any who mimic their hypocrisy. In Matthew 26, the plot against Jesus begins, thus implying it was anger over Jesus's words that prompted the "chief priests and the elders of the people" to act (26:1–5; cf. 27:18).

Matthew's language against the Jewish leaders is not only difficult when interpreting the Gospel today, but also when we see it used to justify any anti-Semitism. Many of us easily link these ideas to the horrors of the Holocaust, but anti-Jewish policies and violence were practiced long before then. Western societies have likewise seen recent upticks in anti-Semitism, meaning we need

to continue dealing with these troubling texts. Remembering that the Gospel of Matthew is itself a Jewish, rather than a Christian, story is critical in this reflection. Matthew participates in an *internal Jewish debate* over the identity of the Christ, rather than being an outsider's polemic against a different religion. Indeed, as social identity theory demonstrates, people are often (though not always) more critical of those considered part of their group than those who are clearly on the outside.[23] After all, the thought goes, *they should know better*! Indeed, Matthew's polemic against the Jewish leaders regularly has this tone: they know Scripture, so they *should* recognize Jesus as the Christ. Their failure, thus, garners an even sharper rebuke from Matthew's Gospel.

Many scholars seek to tie Matthew's negative characterization of Jewish leaders to the social situation of the Gospel's earliest audiences.[24] Set in a post–70 CE world, these Jesus-followers lived in a time just after the Jerusalem temple's destruction and in the wake of the Roman response to the first Jewish rebellion. From this perspective, many of Jesus's warnings in Matthew 23–25 have already come to fruition. The specific venom Matthew has against Pharisees and scribes might also hint at its post–70 CE reality, since these leaders survived the rebellion, while the Sadducees and other temple authorities did not. The Gospel of Matthew, therefore, is interpreting what it means to be disciples of Jesus after the destruction of the temple, in the midst of a Roman-dominated world, and perhaps at odds with other surviving Jewish groups. The diversity of Jewish expressions outlined above reminds us that such debates were common in the first century, some of them quite heated. Contextualizing Matthew's Gospel in this way does not excuse its language or the anti-Jewish ways it has been and continues to be used, but it does help us understand more clearly *how* Matthew's presentation came about. It should also make us wary of accepting Matthew's presentation wholesale; instead, we should think about what Jesus-followers were facing alongside other Jewish groups in this time period.

CONCLUSIONS

Matthew's Gospel is a story compiled, recorded, composed, and retold by Jesus-followers in the first century CE. As such, it participates as one of the many-faceted expressions of Second Temple Judaism, expressions that consistently wrestled with questions of *how* to be faithful to the God of Israel in the midst of a Gentile-dominated world. The Jesus-followers responsible for and listening to the Gospel of Matthew answered these questions with their fundamental belief that Jesus of Nazareth was God's Christ, whose miraculous birth came as the fulfillment of God's carefully, if surprisingly, orchestrated plan. The surprising rejection, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then, is a continuation of this plan, showing God still acts in ways contrary to expectation.

Belief in Jesus's messianic identity is at the center of Matthew's debates with other Jewish groups, both in the Gospel itself, and in its post–70 CE context. Matthew's Jesus does not disagree with other Jewish schools of thought on foundational elements of Jewish expression such as monotheism, valuing the Torah, and showing faithfulness by loving God and neighbor. Instead, disagreements center on Jesus's identity, and how Jesus's identity shapes his relationship to and interpretation of Scripture. For Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's being God's Christ and Son means that the scriptural story of Israel points to him, just as Matt 1:1–17 demonstrates. So crucial is Jesus's birth that Matt 1:23 gives him the name "Immanuel," or "God with us." For Matthew, Jesus is the hermeneutical key for interpreting all of Scripture, which the Gospel repeatedly emphasizes with fulfillment quotations. From the Gospel's perspective, Jesus has been given "all authority in heaven and earth," and he remains with his disciples through his teaching and through their evangelizing activities to "all the nations"—so much so that the Gospel ends with Jesus's words echoing 1:23: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20).

Matthew's focus on Jesus's messiahship is, therefore, the reason for its negative characterization of Jewish religious leaders. Indeed,

this claim may reflect continuing conflicts present within Matthew's late first-century context. When reading the Gospel today, we need to be careful to contextualize this story within the debates and varieties of Jewish expressions in the Second Temple period and beyond. Rather than assuming Judaism and Christianity were separate from the start, or worse, that Jesus came to start a new religion, we should reflect on the complicated realities of the ancient Roman world, particularly for Jews who lived as a marginal monotheistic group in the midst of a dominating polytheistic culture. We cannot hope to understand Matthew's story well without keeping this context in mind. If we ignore it, we risk repeating the same mistakes from the past by using the words of a Jewish prophet against his own people. No matter our perspectives on Jesus's identity, we should be able to see the flaws in that.