

PARALLEL GUIDE 10

The Gospel According to Matthew, Part II

Summary

The careful reading of the Gospel According to Matthew continues. This chapter reviews Jesus' ministry and concludes with the Passion, Death, and Resurrection. It also refutes the charge of anti-Semitism sometimes ascribed to Matthew.

Learning Objectives

- Continue your reading of the Gospel According to Matthew
- Learn the meaning of:

chesed
ekklēsia
Qumran
pericope
Zealot
The *eschaton*

- Learn the different phases of Jesus' ministry
- Explore the Jewishness of the Gospel According to Matthew

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What do you say to the charge that the Gospel According to Matthew is anti-Semitic?
2. What is the Little Apocalypse?
3. What do you make of the importance that Matthew gives to Peter?

Preparing for Your Seminar

According to Matthew, Jesus expressed compassion for “the crowds.” He commissioned the Twelve to be instruments of *chesed*. How has God's loving kindness (*chesed*) been given and received from your EfM group? This is a good time to take stock, atone for errors, and give thanks for what has been shared and received in your group.

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW, PART II

The remainder of the sermon gives us a series of pericopes that relate to the main theme of discipleship and continue the emphasis on getting priorities right.

Miscellaneous Instructions to the Disciples 7:1-23

In 7:15 disciples are reminded not to set themselves up as judges. The expression “Judge not!” (7:1) is, of course, a hyperbole. Sometimes we are obliged to make judgments (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-6). What is challenged here is our tendency to enjoy judging others and to indulge in it where it is not required of us (cf. also Rom. 2:1). In the parable of the speck and the log (7:3-5), note how much better sense is made by “you that are mistakenly interpreting Torah” as an interpretation of “hypocrite” than “you that say one thing and do another.” There is no question of “hypocrisy” in our sense in the parable. At issue is the human tendency to seize on false priorities.

Words about perseverance in prayer follow (7:11; cf. Luke 11:9-13), and again there is a note of near-comedy that characterizes so much of what Jesus says about prayer. Then come the golden rule (7:12; cf. Luke 6:31) and the parable of the two ways (7:13-14; cf. Luke 13:23-24), which stresses the need for decision.

The warning against false prophets (7:15-20; cf. Luke 6:43-45) points in typically Jewish fashion to “fruits” as the mark of true prophecy rather than “preaching” or “miracles.” The same point is made in the warning against self-deception (7:21-23; cf. Luke 13:24-27).

Hearers and Doers of the Word 7:24-27

The parable of the two house-builders (7:24-27), as in Luke’s sermon on the plain (Luke 6:47-49), provides a fitting conclusion to the discourse by contrasting (in effect) the apt pupil with the dullard, thus facing the hearer with the question, “What kind of disciple will you be?”

The Teacher with Authority 7:28-29

The closing formula is a little confusing, for it speaks of “the crowds” as astonished at Jesus’ teaching. The sermon to this point has been addressed to the disciples (5:1). No doubt Matthew’s interest in the formula is to stress the point he has taken from Mark, namely, that Jesus “taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:29; cf. Mark 1:22).

Jesus’ Ministry Continues 8:1–9:38

A series of pericopes, mostly based on Mark or “Q,” presents the ongoing “mighty works” (what in English

are called “miracles”) and teaching activity of Jesus. As a rule, “miracles” in the Gospels are there to gain attention (both from Jesus’ hearers and from the evangelist’s readers) for what Jesus has to say. The healing of the centurion’s servant (8:5-13, especially 10-12) hints at the Gentile mission. The crowds seem to welcome Jesus (7:28-29), but there are signs of the conflict to come. Representatives of the religious establishment do not welcome him (9:11-13, 34). The section ends (9:35-38) with a Matthean summary of Jesus’ work: teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing (9:35, which repeats 4:23). Matthew prepares us for the calling of the Twelve and the charge to them by speaking of Jesus’ compassion for “the crowds”—the *am ha-arets*. Jesus is compassionate because the crowds are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). In other words, Jesus

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will commission the Twelve because of what in Hebrew is called *chen* (“favour,” “graciousness,” “compassion”) and *chesed* (“loving kindness”).

The Calling of the Twelve 10:1-4

We should not make much of the fact that, in distinction from the similar scene in Mark 3:14-15, there is reference to the authority of the Twelve only to heal, not to proclaim. Once the work of the disciples is described, the list of their tasks is headed by a charge to proclaim what is essentially Jesus’ and the Baptizer’s own message (10:7; cf. 3:2 and 4:17). Matthew emphasizes the continuity of the church’s message with what went before (cf. 13:52).

In his list of the Twelve, Matthew emphasizes the primacy of Peter (10:2), who later is so prominent (e.g., 16:16-23; 18:21; 26:33-35, 69-75), and refers to Matthew as “the tax collector” (10:3). This is the only place where Matthew refers to the Twelve as “apostles.” The word *apostolos* in Greek is equivalent to the Hebrew *shaliach*, meaning “personal representative” or “agent.” Matthew’s more usual picture is that of the teacher with disciples, but apostleship is an important idea in the material that is to come: a Matthean discourse on the work of the Twelve in which the evangelist has combined material from all his sources.

The Missionary Task of the Disciples 10:5-15

Here the disciples’ mission is confined to Jews, to the “lost sheep” of Israel (10:5-6). Presumably the *am ha-arets* and “sinners” would both be included in this category. Jesus stands in the tradition of the prophets (see 10:41), God’s messengers to Israel, setting in order the house of those who “were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). Compare this with his dealing with the Gentile woman (15:21-28). The disciples’ commission is like the master’s activity (4:23; 9:35). With 10:8b compare 2 Corinthians 11:7. They come without charge to those who will receive them. The greeting the disciples offer, *shalom* (“peace,” but with the sense of wholeness and health, not just absence of conflict), is both the ordinary greeting and a prophetic word. That is to say, it effects what it declares. The peace the disciples offer is God’s peace, nothing less than order wrought by the God who brought order out of chaos in the first place. Communities accepting that declaration receive that peace. Those who will not receive it face condemnation (10:13-15). Note, however, that Matthew is speaking about the state of communities, not individuals.

10:16-25

The NRSV “wise” (Greek: *phronimos*) in 10:16 means “prudent” or “shrewd,” one who is competent to live effectively; this is part of the heritage of Old Testament Wisdom Literature, with its roots in counsel for godly and successful life in the world. Religion—Judaism, Christianity, whatever—is after all concerned with how to live.

The section that follows (vv. 17-25) looks as if it might be a revision of Mark 13:9-13. In Mark the section refers to the church in the Gentile world; here it refers to the disciples’ work in Israel. No doubt proclamation

of a messianic kingdom would be of considerable concern to Roman authorities “and the Gentiles” (v. 18) more generally. Such a proclamation would also bring into conflict the loyalties of various Jewish groups. The disciples are not to worry (cf. 6:25) about what they will say, reminding us of Moses’ reluctant commissioning in Exodus 3-4. How we see

the future reference in 10:23 depends in part on how we understand the phrase “**Son of Man.**” Jesus seems to refer to himself as coming, but when—sooner, when he will ask them for an accounting of this mission, or later, when he returns more fully manifested (e.g., as in 26:64)? In any case, the saying (unique to Matthew) serves to underline the sense of urgency and hence the eschatological flavour of both the disciples’ mission and Jesus’ entire ministry.

Confessing Jesus 10:26-42

Three times in verses 10:26-42 the disciple is told not to fear (vv. 26, 28, 31). It is ultimately “safer” to be on God’s side than on any other (10:32-33). The challenge to disciples is to continue to confess Jesus, not in word only (7:21-23) but in deed as well (10:42; cf. 25:31-46), for word and deed are one for God and for God’s prophets.

Any hope that Jesus will bring an age of peace, in the sense of the absence of conflict, is dismissed (10:34). In fact, confessing Jesus threatens every bond, including the bonds of family (10:34-37), and even life itself (10:39). The quotation in 10:35-36 is from Micah 7:6, which the rabbis also cite in reference to troubles that precede the coming of the Messiah (b. Sanh. 97a). Nonetheless, to be so committed is truly to be an “apostle” (that is, an “agent” or *shaliach*) of Jesus, just as Jesus is of the One who sent him. “A man’s agent is as himself,” said the sages. It also follows that “whoever welcomes you welcomes me” (10:40). By extension, to be an “apostolic” church means to be commissioned as representative of and witness to the church’s head.

The phrase “in the name of” may well be a Semitism, an expression whose Hebrew or Aramaic form has been transferred literally into Greek but not really translated. If so, then 10:41 could read “Whoever receives a prophet (righteous person) because that one is a prophet (righteous person) will receive the reward of a prophet (righteous person).” Then what does this verse mean? It means that whoever accords proper status to one of God’s representatives will be rewarded by God as if that one were also such a representative. The welcomer will be rewarded by the one welcomed, but the one welcomed here is stand-in for the sender, so that God is the rewarder. “Little ones” (v. 42) is a common term for disciples; anyone welcoming (“receiving,” offering hospitality to the body and/or to the words—the ambiguity may be deliberate) the representatives will be included in the reward to be received by the representatives themselves.

Jesus Continues his Ministry 11:2-12:50

In the next pericope, which is from “Q,” John the Baptizer hears from prison of “the deeds of the Christ” and sends disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come (Greek: *ho erchomenos*, i.e., “the Messiah”), or are we to wait for another?” (11:3) In reply, Jesus refers to his public ministry (cf. 4:23 and 9:35): “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (11:4). What has been seen and heard is transformative; it cannot not be proclaimed, as is always the case with the prophetic message (cf. Jer. 20:9).

The wording resembles descriptions of the “last days” in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:18; 61:1). The resemblance is deliberate, for the “last days” have come. What has been seen and heard is without precedent, and yet it is only to be expected, consonant with what is known to be the way, the realm of God. One who takes no offence (literally “is not scandalized” or “does not stumble”) at him is blessed (an-

other beatitude!); for those who are scandalized, see 13:57. For Matthew, to stumble in this way, by being offended or scandalized, is to fall away into sin. He uses this expression often (5:29-30; 13:21, 41; 15:12; 16:23; 17:27; 18:6-9; 24:10; 26:31, 33) and there is no middle ground, no neutral zone where discipleship is concerned. Jesus praises John (11:7-15) but goes on to say that neither he nor John has been received, because neither of them fulfils the people's presuppositions (11:16-19). Yet, Jesus says, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (11:19). Luke 7:35 has "children" instead of "deeds" here; John and Jesus are both Wisdom's children, and both rejected. After all, John sent disciples to question Jesus rather than coming himself because he was in jail! So much for Elijah (11:14-15; cf. 17:13), whose role, as Messiah's forerunner, John fulfilled. Finally, Jesus appeals to the crowds, to the religious establishment, and to the reader in terms that remind us of Hebrew Wisdom (11:25-30; cf. 11:19b; Sir. 51:1, 10, 23, 26-27). Jesus is the Wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30), and this is Wisdom's invitation (cf. 1 John 5:3).

In response to this appeal Matthew gives us a selection of conflict stories from Mark and elsewhere. The effect of these is to show increasing hostility toward Jesus on the part of the religious establishment and the crowds (12:1-45). The pericope on Christ's real brothers and sisters (12:46-50), with its assertion that disciples alone are Jesus' true family, prepares the way for the discourse in chapter 13.

The Kingdom of Heaven 13:1-53

In this chapter Matthew broadly follows Mark, but he has also made some important changes. In addition to an insertion of quotations from scripture he omits Mark's parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), perhaps because it was similar in form, although not in intention, to the parable of the weeds with its explanation (13:24-30, 36-43), which he has put in its place. He has also added the two short parables: the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (13:44-46). The parable of the weeds seems to be a response to the question, "Why doesn't God act against the evil of the world?" The two short parables emphasize the priority of the kingdom over everything else. Most important of all, however, Matthew has changed the tone of his conversation with the disciples (13:10-17; cf. Mark 4:10-13). Whereas Mark emphasizes the degree to which the disciples themselves do not really understand Jesus, Matthew seems to emphasize the degree to which they do understand. He sets the disciples apart from both the religious authorities and the crowds. The disciples are scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven (13:52). The discourse speaks to disciples of the absolute sovereignty of God. This sovereignty is more precious to those than anything else they can conceive (13:44-46). It will be vindicated at the end of the age, no matter what problems or barriers it seems to encounter now (13:24-30, 36-43). It can produce fruit beyond imagining from the tiniest beginnings (13:18-33).

Jesus' Ministry Continues in Galilee and the North 13:54-17:27

In this section Matthew follows Mark. The tension between Jesus and the establishment continues. Jesus makes various withdrawals: at 14:13a after Herod has killed the Baptizer, (14:13a) and after controversies with the Pharisees (15:21, 16:4). In the latter part of the section the meaning of this tension is clear: Jesus speaks twice of his coming suffering and death (16:21; 17:22-23; cf. 20:17-19 for the third of these Passion predictions).

Matthew does not hide the fact that even the disciples' understanding is imperfect. They do not understand the "parable" about what defiles (15:10-16). They are not interested in the "Canaanite woman" (15:21-28). They are slow to see what Jesus means by "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:5-12). Peter has to be called "Satan" for his refusal to accept Jesus' words about the coming Passion (16:23). The disciples' inability to heal shows that they, too, are part of a "faithless and perverse generation" (17:16-17, 20).

There are always glints of resurrection. The Messiah continues to do the works of the end-time and, says

Matthew (adding to Mark), the crowds who see these works glorify the God of Israel (15:30-31). Moved with compassion, Jesus feeds the crowd (15:32-38). In what is undoubtedly the climax of this portion of the story, Peter does make his confession and is assured (in another piece of Matthew's own tradition) that despite his imperfect understanding (16:13-16), he is blessed. On faith such as his, Jesus will build his *ekklēsia* (NRSV "church"). The word *ekklēsia* is generally used in the LXX to translate Hebrew *qahal*, the word for the "congregation" of Israel, the people of God assembled for worship. Even "the gates of Hades" (NRSV) will not be strong enough to stand against the assault of this *ekklēsia* (16:17-18). In light of his faith Peter is invested with "the keys"—that is, he is made a steward (cf. Isa. 22:20-24). As steward he has authority to "bind" and "loose," that is, authority like that of all stewards obediently to carry out the decrees of the one who appointed him. At the conclusion of the section is a difficult pericope that is Matthew's own, the coin in the fish's mouth (17:24-27). Though a *mitzvah* ("commandment"), the half-shekel was given voluntarily. There were no "collectors" of it. Therefore it cannot be "the half-shekel tax" that is referred to in verse 17:24. The Greek of this verse simply says, "Those who collect the didrachma." Lacking other evidence, we must assume them to be collectors of civil tax. Jesus' question about "the kings of the earth" certainly speaks of civil tax (NRSV "toll," Greek: *telē*) and the "capitation tax" (NRSV "tribute," Greek: *kenson*) (17:25). The coin in the fish's mouth is a *stater* (17:27). The *statēr* had not been legal coinage in Palestine since the period of Alexander the Great. The word *statēr*, in its Aramaic form, continued in the language as a term for a small worthless coin. It would certainly not have been used in reference to a shekel.

This pericope is concerned primarily with Jesus' attitude to civil taxation and has nothing to do with the half-shekel tax. Since the pericope is set in Capernaum (17:24), it is relevant to note that a collection house for the civil tax has been identified at Capernaum. In view of its size Capernaum may have been a taxation center for the region. In interpreting the pericope we probably do well to remember the pericope on tribute to Caesar already discussed (Mark 12:13-17). There, also, a question was raised about Jesus' attitude to the civil tax. In the present passage Jesus seems to say that as the children of kings of the earth are free from tax, so the children (of God) must be free—a "light and heavy" argument. Nevertheless, offense is not to be caused: payment is to be made. In fact, what is paid to the civil authorities is worthless, a mere *statēr* (17:27). The conclusion is not substantially different from what Mark 12:17 gives. Once more it sets Jesus apart from the Zealots.

The Compassion of the Kingdom 18:1-35

Question: "Who is greatest in the sphere of God's sovereignty?" Answer: "Only one who accepts it like a child." It is not that disciples must be childish, or that they are called to be sentimental about childhood. The demand here is entirely realistic and unsentimental. A normal, sensible child knows perfectly well that he or she does not know everything, does not and cannot possess everything, and is not self-sufficient. So are we, in relation to God, and such must be our attitude to God if we are to participate in God's kingdom (18:1-4). The supreme quality of the kingdom, in relation to us, is compassion. We are once more in the realm of *chen* ("graciousness," "compassion") and *chesed* ("loving kindness"). "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4) To participate in the kingdom means accepting that compassion is the source of our hope; consequently, compassion must be the foundation of our behavior. Compassion will lead us to care about the least in the community (18:5-6). Compassion is the exercise of the love that is the great commandment in the Law (22:37-39).

In this context we are to understand the expressions of verses 18:8-9 as an example of **Semitic hyperbole**. Their lesson, repeated in another way in verses 18:12-14, is to be taken seriously. Their content is the need for compassion. The story in Luke is chiefly a reminder of God's loving kindness; here it seems to remind us that we must be similarly compassionate to every "little one" (18:10-14). Compassion does not mean that we never question or challenge the behavior of another, or that the other will never question us. But there is a way of questioning another that is compassionate. It begins between the two alone; at the next stage it will include a few trusted companions; then, if necessary, it will be referred to the entire Christian community.

Only then, if all else fails, should one regard the relationship as at an end (18:15-17).

The stewardship of the kingdom is given to the community that seeks to act in compassion. It hears precisely the same words as had earlier been spoken to Peter (cf. 16:19; 18:18). Matthew sees no contradiction. Stewardship is given to Peter on the basis of his faith, and it means authority to be obedient. Now we learn that whoever shares in the obedience shares also in the authority. This is why popes and archbishops have at times been rebuked by lay people and have accepted the rebuke. At Lambeth Palace, the official residence of the archbishops of Canterbury, there is an inscription: “We seek not the honours of the Apostles, but their labours.” To those who accept the labors, the honors are given.

The secret of effectual prayer is compassionate regard for others. Any prayer “in his name” is grounded in faithful obedience to the community’s Lord, in acknowledging him as the community’s model. How did he pray? Even his prayer for deliverance from the cross (26:39) was a prayer that the Father’s will be done, and so the community’s prayer must be one for openness to discern that will and do it, as the Lord’s Prayer itself reminds us (cf. 6:10). Here again the disciple represents the master; it is as if the master himself is praying when the disciples are operating “with one accord,” as the earliest Christian community is described repeatedly in the Acts of the Apostles.

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Obedient compassion means readiness to forgive (cf. 6:14-15). “Seventy times seven” means always (18:22), and yet, as the discourse began by reminding us, and as the parable of the unmerciful servant now demonstrates (18:23-35), the measure of compassion we are called upon to show by forgiving others is nothing to the measure of compassion we ourselves have already received. **Yellow highlighting**In the NT forgiving is not, it should be understood, an emotional act. Disciples are not called upon to feel forgiving. To forgive means to cancel a debt. Forgiving is an act of will, not a feeling. Disciples are asked to cancel debts, just as their debt to God has also been cancelled (18:35).

Jesus’ Journey to Jerusalem 19:1-20:34

This section follows Mark, with one major addition: **the parable of the laborers in the vineyard**. This is a parable about the graciousness that characterizes the kingdom (20:1-16). Human business is run on the basis of pay for merit. On such a basis the last laborers deserve only a fraction of what is paid to the first. God’s relationship to the vineyard is based not on the attitudes and values of business but on God’s own loving kindness. There is no such thing as a fraction of the loving kindness of God.

Jesus’ Ministry in Jerusalem 21:1-22:46

In verses 21:1-22:46 Matthew continues to follow Mark, with occasional rearrangements of Mark’s order to make the narrative more straightforward. Unlike the other Gospels, Matthew’s account of the triumphal entry shows a misunderstanding of the Hebrew parallelism of Zechariah 9:9 (quoted in 21:5) as specifying two animals rather than one. For Matthew, as for Mark, the cleansing of the Temple is a pivotal event that confronts the religious authorities with the question of Jesus’ authority (21:12-27). Matthew, however, has made some significant additions. The parable of the two sons (21:28-32) and the parable of the marriage feast (22:1-14) heighten the sense of estrangement between Jesus and the authorities. That estrangement was present in Mark, but Matthew has omitted the “wise” scribe’s approval of Jesus or Jesus’ praise of the scribe (22:34-40; cf. Mark 12:32-34). The effect of this omission is to leave the tension between Jesus and the establishment unrelieved. Thus the scene is set for the fifth and last discourse.

Warnings to Teachers and Leaders 23:1-25:46

The passage is addressed to “the crowds and to his disciples” (23:1), meaning those who are leaders or potential leaders of the Christian community (23:2-12). The authority of the teachers of Israel is granted (vv.

2-3a), but they have failed to use that authority properly (vv. 3b-7). They serve, therefore, as an example and warning—a parable—to the leaders of the Christian community (vv. 8-12).

What follows (vv. 13-36) is ostensibly addressed to the Pharisees. No one can seriously imagine that in preserving these sayings Matthew really thought that many Pharisees would be likely to read what he wrote. In the days before printing, gospels were not handed out as tracts at street corners. Matthew still has in mind the “crowds” and the “disciples.” The passage is written as a warning to Christian leaders. Matthew does identify the Pharisees as his examples of “what not to do.” Why? Many strands of the gospel tradition suggest that Jesus had differences of opinion with some Pharisees. Whether these were “in-house” debates or not remains a matter for discussion, but the basic fact seems clear. It is also clear, however, that Matthew, or

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Matthew’s community, had a particular dislike of Pharisees. This is shown not only by the fact that Matthew is the only part of the gospel tradition never to show Jesus in any friendly relationship with Pharisees but especially by the present chapter, in which Matthew seems to gather together every critical remark about the Pharisees that he could possibly have found.

We must set this chapter, and Matthew’s general attitude toward Pharisees, in the context of other examples of sectarian controversy. Few groups in Judaism at this period are polite toward other groups. It was not an age of “dialogue.” We have only to compare the Qumran sectaries’ attitude to their opponents (e.g., in the Damascus Document), or the attitude of the Talmud to the Sadducees, to see that there is nothing especially uncharitable about Matthew 23. The chapter simply reveals that, whatever else the Scriptures may be (and they are much else), they are also documents of their own times. Just as we will not take Numbers 31:7-18 as our standard for treatment of prisoners of war, so we cannot take as our models those attitudes to other religious groups implied by Matthew 23.

It is important that we note the nature of the accusation made here. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29) As we saw in our previous chapter, it is not “hypocrisy” in our sense that is meant. For many of the charges presented in Matthew 23, such an interpretation would make no sense (e.g., vv. 16-22, 23-24). The accusation is that Jesus’ opponents have interpreted the Torah wrongly. “False interpreters” or “mistaken interpreters” would be better translations. How are the Pharisees “false interpreters”? Commentators point to the accusation that they are obsessed with details of religious practice at the expense of essentials of Torah such as “justice, mercy, and faith” (e.g., vv. 16-22, 23-24, 25-26). But precisely in what way have the “scribes and Pharisees” been guilty of this distortion? The clue is in the closing verses of the chapter (23:29-35). The second part of verse 35 is a Matthean editorial footnote, for it refers to events in the war of 66-70 CE. During the siege of Jerusalem, Zealot revolutionaries shed the blood of their fellow Jews in the city. Zechariah the son of Berachiah (not to be confused with the prophet of Zechariah 1:1) was given a mock trial and put to death by the Zealots in the Temple (Josephus, War).

Matthew does not attack the Hillelite Pharisaism of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and the academy at Yavneh, which had many attitudes, including opposition to the Zealots, in common with Jesus. (Since the academy at Yavneh had little effect on Judaism at large until the nineties, it is possible that Matthew and his community were not even aware of it.) Nor does Matthew attack later rabbinic Judaism. He is attacking the Shammaite Pharisaism that was dominant in the period before the fall of Jerusalem, a school of Torah interpretation whose obsessions and zealotry he sees as directly responsible for the destruction of the city and the Temple. “How can you escape being sentenced to hell?” they are asked (23:33). According to Eusebius the Jerusalem Christians did escape from Jerusalem at the command of an oracle in response to their prayers (Eccl. Hist. 3.5.3). “Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation” (23:36). It is hard not to suspect that the Matthean community included some who had been involved in the catastrophe and flight. Such a situation

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would be sufficient to explain the Gospel's bitter opposition to Shammaite Pharisaism, which, from the viewpoint of those who had experienced its ascendancy in the years before 70 CE, virtually was Pharisaism.

Whether this understanding of the background be right or not, we must insist that Matthew cannot be used to provide justification for anti-Jewish sentiment today. Historically, to the great discredit of Christians in many generations, Matthew's additions to Mark have been read as exonerating Gentiles and convicting Jews of responsibility for the death of Jesus. The result has been an enormous contribution to the sad history of Christian oppression of Jews and consequently to the legacy of mistrust and separation that continues even today, despite the efforts of many to overcome it. Even if it could be shown that Matthew himself thought the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE to have been God's judgment on the Jews who killed Jesus, Christians today would be under no obligation to agree.

The climax of the warnings to teachers and leaders is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (23:37-39; cf. Luke 13:34-35). This is an oracle in the prophetic manner. "Behold, your house is left to you" was the original saying in "Q" (cf. Luke 13:35). "And desolate," Matthew adds bitterly. Yet there is also hope. Luke has placed the oracle so that it seems to refer to Jesus' entry into the city, but that cannot be Matthew's intention, since in his arrangement the entry has already happened. Rather, with his addition of "again" in verse 39, Matthew seems to understand the oracle as referring to Christ's coming vindication, which Jerusalem—even desolate and forsaken Jerusalem—will one day welcome, saying, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (23:39, quoting Ps. 118:26).

The remainder of the discourse in verses 24:1ff. moves directly to discussion of the last things. The beginning of the discourse (24:1-36) is largely based on Mark's little apocalypse (Mark 13:1-32). Matthew, however, has indicated the center of his interest by altering the opening conversation with the disciples, who now ask explicitly, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3; cf. Mark 13:4) and by adding (probably from "Q;" cf. Luke 17:23-24, 37) a saying that affirms that Jesus' final coming will be a cosmic event seen by all.

The Last Things (The *Eschaton*) 24:1-25:46^{top}

Matthew adds five parables to the little apocalypse. These are very important for they qualify and explain the nature of Matthew's concern about "the close of the age." It is not a matter of calculating dates, which are not ours to know (see 24:36). **Charles Wesley is said to have been asked one morning what he would do if he knew that this was to be his last day on earth. "I should do," he replied, "precisely what I intend to do anyway."** Proper concern about the end is a matter of living now the life that will prepare us for it. Once he has spoken of the need for readiness (24:37-42), Matthew gives us the parables of the thief in the night and the faithful and wise servant (24:43-51). In that context, they oblige us to ask the question, "What is readiness?" The parable of the ten maidens speaks of those so confident in their possession of grace that they do nothing to prepare themselves at all (25:1-13). The parable of the talents speaks of one so terrified by the prospect of judgment that he also does nothing (25:14-29).

The vision of the sheep and the goats—it is not really a parable—finally roots readiness for judgment in our willingness to attempt that *chesed* or loving kindness to which Matthew has pointed us from the beginning (25:31-46). It quite misses the point of this passage to ask whether faith in Jesus now counts for nothing, or whether this is a judgment of the whole world rather than just of believers. As it stands in Matthew the passage is plainly addressed to the believing community, not to those outside it. It is the concluding part of the instruction to the church on how to prepare for the parousia. The emphasis of the pericope is neither on the surprise of those addressed nor on any good or evil in themselves of which they are unaware. The emphasis is on one thing only: "As you did it [or did it not] to one of the least of these . . . you did it [or did it not] to me" (25:40, 45). Thereby Jesus shows that the rank-and-file believers, even the humblest, are his

representatives. Only those believers, and Christian leaders who try to live by *chesed* toward them, can endure to be or presumably would even want to be at the right hand of the king. This is the last word of the public ministry of Jesus, according to Matthew.

Jesus Suffers, Dies, and Is Buried 26:1-27:66

Matthew's account of Jesus' Passion and death is again largely based on Mark, with midrashic additions to which we have already drawn attention. The effect of Matthew's minor changes is to emphasize, even more than does Mark, the total failure of every human establishment from which Jesus might have expected support. Gentile government washes its hands of him (27:24). Religious establishment rejects him (27:20, 41). Even the *am ha-arets*, who up to this point have been supportive of Jesus, are persuaded to join in rejecting him (27:20-23). "His blood be on us and on our children!" they cry (27:25). The male disciples of Jesus are nowhere to be seen (26:56b), save for the betrayer (26:48-50) and the denier (26:69-75). The story ends with the two major power groups, the religious establishment and the Roman government, combining forces to make sure that nothing further is heard of Jesus (27:62-66). There are signs of hope, but they are faint. A group of soldiers, paid to do a job, expresses admiration (27:54). The women disciples are faithful (27:55-56). And one rich man, "a disciple," appears too late to do anything very much, but gives Jesus a tomb (27:57-61).

Resurrection 28:1-15

We discuss the Resurrection of Jesus more at a later stage of our study. For the present, we note Matthew's conviction that, despite the efforts of church and state, God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead.

Jesus Commissions the Church 28:16-20

Jesus appears as royal Son of Man in power, to whom has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (28:18). The promise of verse 16:28 is fulfilled. Yet this is also a commission. We already know something of what is going to happen after it, for we have been given advance information in the discourse on the last things (e.g., 24:9-14). There will be persecution and difficulty, yet Jesus will finally come as royal Son of Man at the close of the age to judge the nations (25:31-46). In the meantime the "great commission" is an ending to the Gospel that is also a beginning. It invites the disciples to join in the evangelization of the nations. By doing so they will share in the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that in his seed "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3)—the promise from which, in a sense, the Gospel began (1:1-2). The great commission also promises that despite all appearances to the contrary, Jesus will be present with his disciples "to the end of the age" (28:20).

Students of Matthew have long noted its "Jewishness." It may come as something of a surprise, therefore, to learn that some have spoken of Matthew as "anti-Semitic" (or, more precisely, "anti-Jewish"). This charge arises from a salutary (if belated) horror felt by Christians at how Matthew has been used as a quarry for proof texts to support anti-Jewish sentiment and action, a horror that has led an increasing number of Christians to want to be as honest as possible in admitting the truth of prejudice, even if it be found in the canon of scripture itself. This sober, humble attitude of an increasing number of Christians today is a welcome change from centuries of ignorance, bigotry, and hatred.

The Alleged Anti-Semitism of Matthew

There is a danger of anachronism in looking at ancient texts as if they had been written in our own time. Certainly Matthew, as a Jew with strongly held views, is highly critical of Jewish groups that do not share his views. Matthew is writing at the time when Jews and Christians both are engaged in the most searching kind of self-definition, with Jews trying to decide what it means to be a Jew, and Christians, although they were

not yet so called, trying to decide what it means to be a Christian. Often one group defined itself over against the other; whatever we are, we are not what they are. Jews and Christians charge each other with being unfaithful, which makes for strong language and strong feeling. The separation was made, and it grew increasingly difficult for the two groups not to regard each other as enemies. It also became harder to read each other's texts with understanding.

It is hard to say precisely what Matthew's attitude toward "the Jews" was. It is also unnecessary. The Christian's attitude to Jews today, or to any other group for that matter, is not a transfer of someone else's attitude from long ago, someone in different circumstances writing in a different language for different people. Like Matthew, we who are being trained as scribes for the kingdom seek to be able, like the householder, to draw from our treasure what is old and what is new. We can learn from Matthew without attempting to reproduce him or to sit in judgment upon him—particularly since we can scarcely know enough about him to do either.

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Anti-Semitism in Matthew^{back}

In other words, anti-Semitism hadn't been invented yet. It's a product of the developed Christian church.

Charles Wesley^{back}

Talk about self-confidence! He wouldn't even try to look busy...

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"false interpreters"^{back}

I'm sorry, but the word that he uses, several times, is "hypocrites." I know academic politics is rough, but he's doing more than criticizing their interpretation of the Torah. He's saying that they concentrate on the specifics of the law, but still don't do what is right. That's hypocrisy.

And there's no warrant for suggesting the word "hypocrites" should really mean "false interpreters", and then going on to discuss the suggestion as though it were an established fact. This is a variation on the fallacy of the **Straw Man**.

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ekklesia^{back}

This Greek word originally means "assembly." It became (and remains) the Christian word for "church." Much more later.

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Zealot^{back}

The term is mentioned several times in the chapter, but has not yet been formally introduced and defined. Here's [Wikipedia](#).

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Semitic hyperbole^{back}

I don't find the several references to *Semitic this* and *Semitic that* particularly edifying. That said, I surely hope it's hyperbole. I would have been blind long since, and so would you. But **Origen** thought otherwise. See also Matt **19:12**

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"Judge not"^{back}

No it isn't hyperbole, I believe "judge not" means exactly what it says. When say someone is a jerk, a slob, or whatever, you're taking a piece away from that person's humanity. I'd rather say, "Past experience has shown that this person can reliably be expected to demonstrate jerkline behavior."

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Miracles in the gospels^{back}

Yes, but did Jesus really do the miracles or not? It matters.

The laborers in the vineyard^{back}

One of my favorite parables. Perhaps for the same reason that I like Esau.

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Matthew as anti-Semitic^{back}

Of course he wasn't anti-Semitic. But he *really* didn't like Pharisees. And it's easy for a later age to confuse the references to Pharisees with attacks on Jews in general. I think that, while not hating Jews himself, Matthew unwittingly gave a great deal of ammunition to future generations of Christians who did.

