PARALLEL GUIDE 9
The Gospel According to Matthew, Part I

Summary

This is the first of a two-chapter discussion of the Gospel According to Matthew. The first chapter presents the structure and characteristics of this Gospel and an outline to guide your reading.

Learning Objectives

• Read through the Gospel According to Matthew over the next two sessions

• Identify the following:

Eusebius
Essenes
Herod
ta logia
Halakhic Jewish Community
John the Baptizer

• Learn the relationship of Matthew's Gospel to other Gospels, especially to the Gospel According to Mark

• Understand the historical references to the Gospel According to Matthew

• Learn the association of the Gospel According to Matthew with Antioch in Syria.

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Summarize the characteristics of the Gospel According to Matthew.

2. What does the claim that the Gospel According to Matthew is "clearly that of the kerygma" mean to you?

3. As you read through the Gospel According to Matthew, note:

What key phrases you find;
What images you notice; and
What feelings this Gospel evokes for you.

Preparing for Your Seminar

The Gospel According to Matthew is the opening text of the New Testament, although it is probably not the oldest document. Why does it hold the prime place? What might this mean for us today?

Works Cited

B. W. Bacon, Studies in Matthew (London: Constable; New York: Henry Holt, 1930).

Krister Stendahl, The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament, Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis 20 (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup/Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1954; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

Chapter 9 THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW, PART I

Approaching Matthew: Author, Date, and Origin

Papias, writing around the year 130 CE, said that "Matthew collected the oracles (ta logia or the words) in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could" (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 3.39.16).[top] Later interpreters understood him to refer to the disciple Matthew (Matt. 10:3), and to his Gospel. In fact, neither reference is clear. The logia might have been a collection of proof texts (passages of scripture used to prove something) from the Hebrew Bible, or a collection of sayings of Jesus, perhaps something like "Q." But in any case ta logia seems an unlikely word for a gospel, so Papias is not much help. Matthew's apparent use of Mark (nearly all of it, in fact) and the "Q" source suggests that the First Gospel was not written by an eyewitness, since, presumably, an eyewitness would not have relied on secondhand sources. Since the Matthean Gospel usually improves Mark's Greek, and since no major portion of it shows signs of translation from Aramaic, one might surmise that its author spoke Greek. Quite recently, however, a few scholars have begun to speculate afresh that the present (Greek) Gospel According to Matthew may rest upon a Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic or both) original.

An interesting suggestion about the origin of Matthew was put forward some years ago by the Swedish biblical scholar Krister Stendahl who, in The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament (1954), written chiefly to discuss Matthew's use of the Hebrew Scriptures, suggested that the Gospel might have grown out of the work of a beit ha-midrash (school of interpretation) led by a rabbi who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 13:52). Traditional Jewish methods of teaching and study would have been devoted to the new cause (see below, for example, on Matthean midrash). This would lead us to expect a particularly Jewish sort of gospel, and, indeed, readers have long commented on the Jewishness of Matthew. Scholars have also noticed possible links between Matthew and some of the thinking and interpretation associated with Qumran (for example, Matthew's particular way of using certain proof texts from Hebrew Scriptures; see below). If Matthew's beit ha-midrash existed, were some of its members former Essenes? Matthew seems to reflect a particular dislike of (Shammaite) Pharisaism, which it associates directly with responsibility for the destruction of Jerusalem (see below, especially on Matthew 23). Were some of the members of Matthew's beit ha-midrash involved in that calamity and the Christian flight from Jerusalem?

For many centuries Matthew was the most influential of the Gospels. The fact that it was placed first in the New Testament canon both reflected this status and served to enhance it. While we can see qualities in the Gospel itself that sustained this position, it is also likely that it had the enthusiastic support of a major Christian center. In view of Matthew's Jewish interest we might expect such a center to have been a place where there were many Jewish Christians. A number of scholars have thought that Syrian Antioch and the surrounding area would meet these requirements. Syria seems also to have had an Essene presence.[top]

Because Matthew's Gospel appears to reflect the actual event of the fall of Jerusalem (22:7), scholars date it after 70 CE. It is also often said that expressions like "to this day" (27:8; 28:15) mean that a long time has passed since the recorded events. But what is a long time? Five years can be a long time in some connections. Scholars have also suggested that a gospel that is so "formal" and "ecclesiastical" must be late, but reflection on the structure of other Jewish communities (such as Qumran) makes it hard to see why such a dating must be assumed. Most scholars date Matthew about 85-95 CE, and this may be correct, but a date as early as the middle 70s is not impossible.

We do not know the name of the First Evangelist, or even whether the evangelist was one person. We call "him" Matthew for convenience only. Nevertheless, although we do not know who the evangelist was, we can guess a good deal about his interests and purpose from what he wrote. When Matthew uses Mark, he often alters emphases and makes changes to suit his own concerns (cf. e.g., Matt. 3:1-8 and Mark 1:1-6). It is best to take a look at Matthew's overall structure.

Structure

We can outline the basic structure of Matthew's Gospel as follows:

1:1-4:11—The coming of the Messiah fulfills scripture

1:1-17—Genealogy based on Hebrew Scriptures

1:18-2:23—The birth of the Messiah

3:1-4:11—John the Baptist; Jesus is baptized, commissioned by the Spirit, and tempted

4:12-25:46—Jesus does mighty works and teaches with authority

4:12-18:35—Jesus' ministry in and near Galilee

19:1-20:34—Jesus' journey to Jerusalem

21:1-25:46—Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem

26:1-27:66—Jesus suffers, dies, and is buried

28:1-15—Jesus is raised from the dead

28:16-20—The exalted Jesus commissions the church

Within the large central section of this structure, which is clearly that of the kerygma, we notice five "discourses," each consisting of collected sayings of Jesus arranged around various topics, as follows:

5-7—The life of discipleship (the Sermon on the Mount)

10—The mission charge

13—The kingdom of heaven (parables)

18—The life of compassion

23-25—Warnings to teachers and leaders; the last things (the eschaton)

Each discourse ends with a roughly similar formula (7:28-29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

On the basis of this analysis most critics also acknowledge a theory put forward around 1930, that Matthew's Gospel was intended to provide a kind of Christian

Pentateuch, with the birth narratives as prologue and the Passion narrative as appendix. So stated, the theory claims too much. The Gospel According to Matthew tells a story based on the kerygma. The Passion narrative is not an appendix to that story, but its climax. It is entirely likely that the existence of five books of Mosaic Torah had some influence on Matthew's decision to create five books of messianic Torah.

Characteristics of the Gospel

The reader should study the following sections with the text of Matthew in hand, referring to the appropriate passages in the Gospel as we proceed.

Written for the Needs of the Church

• The structure of Matthew shows us at once that it is an orderly Gospel. This makes us think that Matthew wrote with the needs of the church in mind. His is the only one of the Four Gospels to use the word "church" (Greek: ekklēsia [16:18; 18:17]). Some suggest that the Gospel was designed for use at worship. Krister Stendahl is surely right in calling Matthew a handbook for teaching and administration in the church and in comparing its form with the Qumran Manual of Discipline. This is not to deny that Matthew's is fundamentally a gospel with a story, following the pattern of the apostolic proclamation, but Matthew's orderliness does seem particularly suited to the church's teaching needs.

Written for Jewish Christians

• Matthew shows himself well aware of—and enthusiastic about—the Gentile Christian mission. His Gospel concludes with the challenge to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). Yet the particular Christian community for which he writes is undoubtedly a predominantly Jewish-Christian community, determined to honor faithfully all the commandments given to the Jewish people.

The early church, particularly under the leadership of Paul, decided that Gentiles did not need to accept all commandments laid upon Israel in the biblical tradition in order to be joined to the people of God in the messianic age. In particular, Gentile men did not need to be circumcised. The church came to this conclusion by putting its understanding of the old (Jewish) Scriptures together with its new Christian experience; cf. Matthew 13:52. Nowhere did the church ever suggest that Jews should cease their concern for all the commandments. On the contrary, underlying the NT in general is the assumption that Jewish followers of Jesus would continue to accept the full requirements of the Torah. This is God's special gift to them. In accordance with the promises of the Torah, Gentiles, however, would accept some form of what later came to be known in rabbinic tradition as the Noachic commandments. The Noachic commandments prohibit idolatry, blasphemy, murder, stealing, sexual sins, and eating the limb of a living animal (i.e., cruelty to animals); they also affirm the imperative to establish courts of justice (Acts 15:19-20).

We speak further of the Noachic commandments when we come to discuss Acts 15. For the moment, as a summary of the foregoing, the reader may reflect on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:17-19.

Righteousness According to Jewish Standards

Matthew's concern that the Christian community should be righteous and obedient according to the strictest Jewish standards suggests that Matthew was writing not just for Christians generally but for a "halakhic" Jewish Christian community (that is, a community concerned with acceptable ways of keeping the biblical commandments as Jews).[top]

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:17-20; cf. 23:2-3, 23)

At times it seems probable that we can perceive Matthew’s concern with particular halakhic questions that were discussed by rabbis of the period (e.g., see below on 5:32).

According to the Scriptures

It would be natural that, in writing for Jewish Christians, Matthew should place special emphasis on the fact that, in the life of Jesus, God has begun to fulfill the promises to Israel (1:1-17). This conviction is always a feature of Christianity, yet Matthew seems notably interested in it. It is evidently the motive for his use of what are sometimes called “formula quotations,” texts from scripture generally introduced by some such phrase as “this happened in order to fulfill what was written by the prophet.” For example:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (1:22-23, quoting Isa. 7:14) These formula quotations occur not only in Matthew’s birth stories (1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23) but also elsewhere in the Gospel (4:15-16; 8:17; 12:18-21; 13:35; 21:5; 27:9-10). As we see again and again in the NT, appeal to the Scriptures is always a part of Christian proclamation, not just here. Yet these quotations in Matthew do have several features. Several of them seem to be independent translations from the Hebrew rather than quotations from the LXX. In their direct application of ancient prophecy to current events, they remind us of the method of the Qumran pesher (commentary), which also took passages from prophecy and applied them directly to events in the sect’s own history.

Some critics suggest that Matthew’s scriptural quotations led him, or his sources, to invent the context for them. Thus the story of the virgin birth is held to have been invented to fit Isaiah 7:14, “a young woman shall conceive and bear a son.” The Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 does not require that the “young woman” (almah) be a virgin.

The Greek word parthenos, which both LXX and Matthew use, ordinarily (but not always) means “a young woman who is a virgin.” Thus the Isaiah text might have been seized upon in order to give biblical warrant for a story that already existed. Matthew uses scriptural quotations to deal with a question he finds in the story: “Is this really in accordance with God’s promises?” he asks, or even more simply, “Why did this happen?” In other words, the tradition about Jesus’ birth as Matthew has received it includes “this”—the assertion that his mother was a virgin. That “this” was “in accordance with scripture” would then have been regarded by him and his readers as an important and relevant answer.

Matthew’s other formula quotations address questions like the following:

• Was it in accord with scripture for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem? (2:5-6; cf. Mic. 5:2)

• Was it in accord with scripture for the Messiah to flee to Egypt? (2:15; cf. Hos. 11:1; Exod. 4:22)

• Why were all those innocent children killed at the birth of the Messiah? (2:18; cf. Jer. 31:15)

• Why did the Messiah’s work begin in Galilee instead of in Judah and Jerusalem? (4:14-16; cf. Isa. 9:1-2)

• Was it in accord with scripture that the Messiah would be a healer? (8:17; cf. Isa. 53:4)

• Why did the Messiah withdraw from his opponents instead of overthrowing them? (12:15-21; cf. Isa. 42:1-4)

• Why did the Messiah teach in parables? (13:35; cf. Ps. 78:2)

• Was it right for the Messiah to enter Jerusalem on an ass? (21:4-5; cf. Zech. 9:9)

• Was it in accord with scripture that the Messiah should be betrayed? (27:9-10; cf. Jer. 32:6-15;18:2-3; Zech.11:12-13)

As in the case of Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14, so also in these other cases: scripture is brought to bear as part of the evangelist's way of dealing with what has in fact happened, at least the way he has heard the story. Jesus did heal, did teach in parables, did enter Jerusalem on an ass, was betrayed—why? So that scripture might be "fulfilled," that is, made alive in the community. God's presence was in some ways identified with God's Torah, and Matthew understood that presence to have been rekindled in Jesus, who came not to abolish the Law [Torah] or the prophets but to fulfill them (5:17). "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52). This is how scripture works in the community of the

people of God: the old being brought to life again by prayerful consideration of present demands in light of past instruction and by faithful translation of the word of God into the world of humankind.

Matthean Midrash

Matthew embellishes the gospel tradition with midrash, particularly with haggadic midrash (that is, material explaining or interpreting elements in the tradition other than halakhah). Examples are Matthew's account of the conversation between Jesus and the Baptist at Jesus' baptism (3:14-15) and the story about Pilate's wife's dream (27:19). Many scholars have been inclined to undervalue this material because of its lack of historical accuracy. But haggadic midrash, like the appeal to scripture, is the beit ha-midrash's way of interpreting and explaining the tradition. (The attempts of other commentators to assert that these passages do record actual historical events is equally inappropriate. Their refusal to acknowledge the literary method that the evangelist has chosen displays a fundamental unwillingness to take the biblical text seriously.) In our earlier remarks about the Targum, we noted that haggadic midrash gave answers to difficult questions raised by the biblical text. Matthean midrash works in exactly the same way with the traditions about Jesus. The life of Jesus is the text the evangelist is interpreting. It is not difficult, as a rule, to see what the questions were. For example:

• Why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? (3:14-15)

• Could God not have saved Jesus from the cross? (26:52-54)

• What happened to Judas? (27:3-8)

• Why did Pilate—notorious as a harsh, cruel governor—hesitate to execute Jesus? (27:19)

• Then why did Pilate finally execute Jesus? (27:24-25)

• Was Jesus' resurrection for him alone, much like the stories of Enoch and Elijah escaping death? (27:51b-

53)

• Could the disciples have stolen Jesus' body? Was that not what some people say happened? (27:62-66; 28:2-4, 11-15)

This Gospel begins with the most elaborate midrash of all, in which Matthew presents his view of the relationship of the story of Jesus to all that has gone before (1:1-2:23). In a sense, Jesus himself is both the first and the final midrash, the ultimate interpretation of the meaning of scripture. Jesus becomes the text for the ongoing midrashic activity of the people of God as they reflect on how to put the new—Jesus—together with the old—Torah, Israel—in a way that acknowledges both Jew and Gentile as full members of the community and joint heirs of the covenant relationship between God and humankind.

Reflecting on the questions addressed by the Matthean midrash is worthwhile because many of them are still asked by Christians today. Although the method of midrash

seems very different from our way of dealing with these questions, the content of Matthew's midrash may still be worth our attention. Thus we would probably not answer a question about the importance of Jesus' resurrection for the rest of humanity as Matthew does by talking about the departed saints walking around Jerusalem (27:51b-53). But we must make the point that Matthew made, namely that Christians understand God's raising Jesus from the dead not just as an isolated personal triumph but also as the first fruits of the general resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20). No matter how we understand the NT teaching about both Jesus' resurrection and our own, we have the responsibility to integrate old and new in a way that seeks to be faithful to what we have received and to what they—our forebears in the faith—experienced. That interpretive task is difficult and, like the moral task of deciding how we ought to live in our world, it has to be done afresh in every generation of the church's life. Just as both new and old are brought out of the householder's treasure again and again in the ordinary course of living, so also in the church, as the great twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said, we hold the Bible in one hand and today's newspaper in the other, if we are to be faithful to what we know and who we are. The fact that the beit ha-midrash treated the traditions about the coming of Jesus in this way is evidence of the enormous importance those early "scribes trained for the kingdom" attached to them. At this period, "canonical" Scriptures for Judaism may broadly be defined as those traditions that are regarded as having authority and therefore requiring interpretation. Midrashic treatment of the Jesus-tradition shows that it was already seen as having this character.

The Close of the Age

Finally, Matthew's interest in the "already" dimension of Christian belief in the fulfillment of God's promises is also balanced by his interest in the "not yet" dimension of Christian expectation. The "end" is the subject of several of the parables peculiar to him: the weeds, with its interpretation (13:24-30, 36-43), the ten virgins (25:1-13), the talents (25:14-30), and the sheep and the goats (25:31-46). Matthew changes the disciples' question to Jesus before Mark's "little apocalypse," so that it becomes a question about "the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (24:3; cf. Mark 13:4). He adds some striking details to the apocalypse itself (24:14, 30-31). One suspects that life was not easy for Matthew's struggling (probably tiny) halakhic community (10:16-39). Matthew paints a generally unflattering picture of the "establishment," both of the state or of religion, and of Jewish or Gentile. One of Jesus' sayings, obviously a favorite, since Matthew quotes it twice, is that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (19:30; 20:16). No wonder then that Matthew, and many of his community, should look with longing eyes for "the close of the age."

An Outline of Matthew

Read through the Gospel According to Matthew, following the outline given in this chapter. Recall its major

themes.

1:1-4:11—The Coming of the Messiah Fulfills Scripture

Genealogy Based on Hebrew Scriptures 1:1-17

The purpose of biblical genealogy is theological rather than historical. Jesus' identity as son of David and son of Abraham is shown through his ancestors. The careful symmetry of the genealogy (see 1:17) emphasizes that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope. In Hebrew tradition the number seven regularly represents

the divine activity. Thus there are seven days of creation and seven spirits of God before the throne (Gen. 1:1-2:3; cf. Rev. 1:4, 9, 16, 20; 3:1). In Hebrew the letters of the alphabet are also used as numerals; fourteen is the numerical value of the letters that make up the name David.

Matthew edited the scriptural tradition to make it fit this scheme; evidently he was not a literalist. We also must ask the question, "Could the evangelist count?" Thus Matthew 1:2-6a lists fourteen generations, and 1:6b-11 lists another fourteen, but 1:12-16 lists only thirteen. In addition, Matthew has deliberately interfered with his careful symmetry by introducing women. All of the women he mentions have something irregular or scandalous in their sexual unions. Their presence in the genealogy serves notice that the gospel of Jesus involves not merely those who have central places in the tradition, but also those who are relatively unimportant and even those who are outcast—women, Gentiles, and sinners.

This section consists of material found only in Matthew. We therefore assign it to "M." (Luke has a genealogy—3:23-38—but it is obviously different in arrangement, content, and purpose from Matthew's and is not therefore regarded as from the same source.) None of the "Christmas stories" is the same in both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew the angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph, not Mary. Matthew has wise men but not shepherds, no enrollment at imperial command, and flight into Egypt but no boy Jesus in the Temple. None of Luke's canticles—Magnificat, Benedictus, Nunc dimittis—appears in Matthew. In form this section is haggadic midrash, an interpretation of the significance of Jesus by narrative.

The Birth of the Messiah 1:18-2:23

In 1:18-25 we learn that Jesus is David's son not through physical begetting, but through acceptance (by legal adoption) by the Davidic descendant Joseph of a child conceived through the Holy Spirit. The child so conceived is therefore also Son of God and Emmanuel ("God with us").

In 2:1-12 Jesus' birth at Bethlehem underlines his identity as son of David. Gentile seers (the Magi) react to his birth with belief. Their worship begins to show us how Jesus will function as son of Abraham: in him the Gentiles also will be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:3).

In 2:13-23, by contrast, we see the hostile reaction of the powerful. Jesus will be rejected by the religious establishment, and Rome will wash its hands of him. Jesus here is shown reliving the experiences of Moses in Egypt and of Israel at the Exodus. The resemblance between the story of the massacre of the innocents and the story of the killing of the Hebrew children in Exodus 1:15-22 is obvious. The resemblance between Matthew's birth stories and the story of Moses' birth as told in the midrashic tradition is even more striking. In Josephus' version of the Moses story, the promised birth of Moses is the direct cause of Pharaoh's decision to order the massacre, just as in Matthew the news of Jesus' birth causes Herod to act.[top] "As was the former redeemer, so will the latter be," said the sages.

Jesus' residence in Nazareth supplies the final clue to his destiny, for it is as "a Nazarene" that Jesus will begin his ministry (4:13). In the word "Nazarene" Mat-

thew may intend a pun or play on the Hebrew word netzer, "shoot" or "branch." It is as the "shoot" or "branch" of Jesse, i.e., as the true heir to the throne of David, that Jesus comes (cf. Isa. 11:1).

John the Baptizer; Jesus is Baptized, Commissioned by the Spirit, and Tempted 3:1-4:11

Although the appearance of the Baptizer (3:1-12)[top] and the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17) occur years later than the events described in the preceding section, they form a natural climax to it. Jesus is now declared to be the "Son, the Beloved," not by scripture or angelic messengers but by the voice of God (3:17). The story of the temptations (4:1-11) is taken from "Q," although Matthew has incorporated something from Mark (see 4:11b; cf. Mark 1:13b; Luke 4:13). The temptation narrative flows naturally from the baptism. Jesus is tested by Satan and shows himself worthy to be Son of God through his obedience.

Matthew 4:12-25:46

Jesus does Mighty Works and Teaches with Authority

Jesus' Ministry in Galilee 4:12-18:35

The opening section (4:12-16) provides a transition. It sets Jesus in Galilee for the first part of his public ministry. The arrest and imprisonment of the Baptizer are the signal for Jesus' ministry to begin. Jesus calls some to "follow" him (4:18-22) and begins his public activity of teaching and healing (4:23-25), ". . . so [that] his fame spread throughout all Syria" (4:24, a characteristic Matthean touch, and easily understandable if the Gospel originated in Syria). Crowds are described as following him "from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (4:25). The summary in 4:23 is repeated in 9:35, each concluding a section of narrative before the beginning of a section of teaching.

The scene is now set for a discourse on the life of discipleship (the Sermon on the Mount, 4:24-7:27). Although this discourse contains a few parallels with teaching material in Mark (e.g., cf. 5:31 with Mark 10:11-12 and its parallel in Matt. 19:9), it consists in general of "Q" material (shared with Luke) and "M" material (peculiar to Matthew, unless Matthew has used "Q" material that Luke decided to leave out). The resemblances to Luke's "sermon on the plain" (Luke 6:20-49) are obvious. Both begin with beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11; cf. Luke 6:20-22), and both end with the parable of the hearers and the doers of the word (Matt. 7:24-27; cf. Luke 6:47-49). Perhaps Luke has simply followed "Q," while Matthew has rearranged and edited his material, including a good deal from other parts of "Q" that Luke also includes elsewhere in his Gospel (e.g., cf. Matt. 6:25-34 with Luke 12:22-31). Matthew's "sermon" has 111 verses to Luke's 33, omitting the narrator's introduction and conclusion in both cases.

The Blessedness of Discipleship 5:1-16

In 5:1-2 Jesus' going "up [on] the mountain" is almost certainly meant to remind us of Sinai. Here Jesus appears as the new Moses, fulfilling the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18:15-19. Mountains also appear at other significant points in the Gospel as the place where Jesus is found, e.g., temptation (4:8), feeding the multitude (15:29), the Transfiguration (17:1), preparation for the Passion (21:1; 24:3; 26:30), great commission (28:16). Certainly the "Sermon on the Mount," as it has come to be called, is at a place apart from "the crowds," for it is addressed to "his disciples."

The Blessedness of Discipleship 5:1-16

Typically, at verses 5:3-12, Jesus does not begin his discourse with exhortation but with proclamation. The "poor in spirit," "those who mourn," and so on, are "blessed," or, as the Greek (and the Hebrew in the background) might more accurately be translated, "fortunate." It may not seem fortunate, in the world's eyes, to be these things, but it is fortunate, for "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:10). It is a sign of Matthew's reverence that he tends to avoid using even the word "God" in speaking of the "kingdom of heaven," which in the other Gospels is called the "kingdom of God." The emphasis here on reward is not intended to suggest payment earned but rather, as in the rabbis, to stress the faithfulness of God.

The passages on "salt" and "light" (5:13-16) are not exhortations to be these things but promises that those who follow Jesus are these things, i.e., as a consequence of discipleship. In rabbinic writing "salt" is often a metaphor for wisdom, so that to have "lost taste" is to "be foolish." As in all kerygma, however, a response is invited. The essence of this response is stated at once (5:16), and the remainder of the discourse develops it.

Disciples and the Torah 5:17-48

Undoubtedly some saw the willingness of Paul and of the church (see Acts 15) to admit Gentiles to fellowship on the basis of less than the full halakhah—in particular, without insisting on circumcision of the men— as evidence that the followers of Jesus were abandoning the Torah. Paul himself was apparently so accused and denied it (Rom. 3:29-31; cf. Acts 21:21). Traditions about Beit Shammai, an important Pharisaic group before 70 CE, suggest that they would certainly have seen the Christian attitude to Gentiles in this light. Accordingly, this section begins with Jesus' statement that following him involves no abandonment of the Torah at all. Indeed, it involves a greater commitment than that of other groups. His disciples' righteousness—which in the context clearly means "Torah righteousness"—must "exceed" that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

There follows at verses 5:21-48 a series of pericopes interpreting passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. In these Jesus is shown using a method of scriptural interpretation similar to that of rabbinic exegesis: "You have heard . . ." (i.e., "you might understand or have been taught that the scriptures say . . ."), "but I say to you . . ." (i.e., "you must instead understand the scriptures to say . . ."). These sections of the discourse are sometimes called "the antitheses," not that there is any opposition between what Jesus teaches and the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, but that his interpretation and application of those teachings is more radical and thoroughgoing than that of other teachers.

In verses 5:21-26 the word "brother" indicates that Jesus is speaking about the behavior appropriate within the community of disciples. In 5:22, "judgment," "council," and "hell of fire" obviously involve a climax, which is probably paralleled by "angry," "insult," and "fool." The NRSV translates the third of these as if it were the Greek word mōros, meaning "fool," but it is more likely to be a transliteration in Greek of an Aramaic word meaning "rebel" (i.e., against God), thus making this the most serious offense of the three. Then verses 5:23-24 speak of a situation where it is not simply that one feels hostile to one's fellow disciple, but that the fellow disciple has

a just claim against one. R. Eleazar ben Azariah (c. 80-120 CE) is said to have taught, "For transgressions between a man and his fellow the Day of Atonement does not effect atonement until he shall have first placated his fellow man" (m. Yoma 8.9). Then verses 5:25-26 add a note of urgency: it is the last hour! The Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teaching in general are set in an eschatological context. This is discipleship for the end-time, which is what the world is now in, without realizing it. In verses 5:27-30 the subject is not attraction between the sexes, but desire without concern. The Greek word (also in LXX) translated "commit

adultery" frequently has the force of "debauch," and so it is to be understood in verse 27b here. Hence, in the context, "causes you to sin" focuses not on the man's fate but on what he has done to the woman and so also to himself. Once again Jesus drives the legal precept's application to its root in the human heart.

The basic principle behind verses 5:31-32 we have already considered (see above on Mark), but we see qualifications added by the Matthean community in verse 32. Possibly these reflect the sort of view attributed in the Mishnah to R. Zechariah ben ha-Katzav (c. 80-120 CE), according to which, in cases of adultery, divorce is not only allowed but commanded, and the adulteress may not marry her paramour. "Just as she is prohibited to the husband, so she is forbidden to the adulterer" (m. Sotah 5.1). It is not hard to see why the Matthean community, with its commitment to a halakhic discipline exceeding that of other Jewish groups, might have footnoted Jesus' saying in this way. The context does not imply prohibition of all marriages involving divorced people, only that an offender should not be allowed to profit by the offense.

The attitudes implied by verses 5:33-37 (cf. Jas. 5:12) resemble closely those of the Essenes, who, according to Josephus, regarded "swearing" as "worse than perjury, for they say that one who is not believed without an appeal to God stands condemned already" (War 2.135).[top] Apparently even Herod excused them from taking the oath of allegiance (Ant. 15.371).

The pericope about retaliation (5:38-42) has a distinctly anti-Zealot note. A Roman soldier had the right, under Roman law, to require a noncitizen to carry his equipment one mile. An anti-Zealot impulse may also lie behind the pericope about love of neighbor (5:43-48). "Hatred of one's enemy" is certainly not a part of any known Jewish ethic but would be perfectly understandable as an interpretation of Leviticus 19:18 by freedom fighters. Thus Matthew 5:48 echoes Deuteronomy 18:13 and Leviticus 19:2. The emphasis is not on a quest for "utter flawlessness" but on the parallel between God's compassion and that compassion for enemies and strangers to which disciples are commanded (cf. v. 45). Being perfect (teleios in Greek) consists in focusing on and attaining one's proper end (telos), that which God has established in creating humanity.

Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting 6:1-18

The triad of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting is characteristically Jewish. It is particularly associated with penitence and was enjoined upon the community in times of national distress both before and after 70 CE. "Three things cancel out the harsh decree, and they are prayer, almsgiving, and repentance," says a third-century rabbi (j. Ta'anith 2.1).

The point stressed in verses 6:1-18 is that Jesus' disciples are not to be "as the hypocrites" (vv. 2, 5, 16). But what does this mean? The usual English meaning of "hypocrites" is "those who pretend to be something they are not." But is this the meaning Matthew intends by his Greek word *hypokritai*? Probably not. In many places in Matthew such a meaning makes no sense. Compare, for example, verses 23:23-24, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" Those addressed in this passage are not criticized for claiming one thing and doing another, but for getting their priorities wrong—fussing about details and overlooking matters of greater significance. The verses make it plain that there is nothing wrong in tithing mint and dill and cummin. Indeed, members of the halakhic community "ought" to do it. But they should not do it at the expense of more central matters of Torah, namely "justice and mercy and faith" (23:23).

The basic sense of Matthew's *hypokritai* is probably close to what members of the Qumran sect called their opponents: *doreshei halakhot*, literally, "interpreters of smooth things." The fundamental accusation that both Matthew and the Qumran sectaries made against their opponents is that they were wrongly interpreting the

Torah. Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, although there are virtues in public piety, there are dangers as well, as rabbinic tradition also points out. Those who perform their religious duty in order to be "praised" (6:2) or "seen" (6:5, 16) have forgotten what truly constitutes prayer, almsgiving, or fasting. They have misunderstood the mitzvah ("commandment") and so are wrongly interpreting the Torah. Matthew may be preserving here Jesus' reaction to public displays of penitence in times of national distress. Nevertheless, Matthew considered the warnings to be as necessary for members of the later Christian community as they had been for Jesus' first hearers. There is a digression in verses 6:7-15, although one appropriately enough added to the section on prayer. Those criticized here are not mistaken interpreters of the Torah but rather Gentiles, who have no understanding of prayer or Torah at all. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (6:7). The saying probably refers to frenzied (Gentile) crowds participating in the rites of first-century mystery cults. The Lord's Prayer itself, both Matthew's version of it and Luke's, will be discussed in a later chapter. The Lord's Prayer is the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. It is a completely Jewish prayer. Any Jew today could pray it, even one in no way sympathetic to Christianity. The prayer may be a midrashic development of David's prayer of blessing in 1 Chronicles 29:10-13, and one can see connections to it or ramifications of it throughout the rest of Matthew's Gospel. The opening of Matthew 6:9 can be translated either "Pray then in this way" (instruction or command) or "You do pray in this way" (description). The extent to which Jesus intended to give his disciples a prayer to say verbatim is not clear; it is certainly the case, though, that when one prays aright—either as a Jew or as a Christian—this is the pattern one inevitably follows.

To Seek One Thing 6:19-34

We have now a group of pericopes that seem roughly to revolve around what we might call "getting priorities straight." As one of the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard's books is titled in English, Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing. The sayings about treasure in heaven (6:19-21; cf. Luke 12:33-34), the light of the body (6:22-23; cf. Luke 11:34-36), and God and mammon (6:24; cf. Luke 16:13) all seem to point in this direction. The word "mammon" in rabbinic texts simply denotes "property" without any bad sense. What is under criticism here is not the notion of property as such, but the devotion of such attention and service to property as is proper toward God alone.

The "light" saying (6:22) is admittedly difficult. But note that the word "healthy" (Greek: haplous) generally translates the Hebrew word tam, which is used in the Scriptures of wholehearted commitment to God, whereas the "unhealthy" (ponēros) or evil eye was generally a term for meanness (cf. 20:15, NRSV margin). This saying, too, contrasts the effects of wholehearted devotion to God with the spiritual niggardliness that is always looking for ways to limit the demands of love. The section is appropriately and magnificently concluded by the pericope on anxiety (6:25-34; cf. Luke 12:22-31). It is important to remember that the pericope is not addressed to those who are on the fringes of the Christian community, but to Jesus' disciples. (Luke is equally clear about this point.) The assumption throughout is that those addressed do have something to wear, eat, and drink. The passage is not an invitation to the oppressed to assume that their oppression is God's will; still less is it an invitation to oppressors to justify their oppressiveness in the name of Christ. If oppressors will take seriously the invitation the pericope offers them, they will no longer need to be oppressors.