

Recent Tendencies in Research on the Gospel according to Matthew

William Loader

“Redaction Criticism”

Half a century ago students of Matthew’s gospel, whether preachers or academics, were reaping the rich harvest of recent analyses of the way Matthew reworked Mark. After what some felt as the depression of historical Jesus studies, where partly scepticism and partly reality made people realise that historical reconstruction was complex and difficult, the new studies called *Redaktionsgeschichte* (“redaction criticism”) were a breath of fresh air. Some had made a virtue out of difficulty by declaring that faith could never be so dependent on historical reconstruction anyway. Others had begun to buck the trend by offering tentative accounts of the historical Jesus again. But in the midst of such uncertainty and almost as part of post world war two reconstruction at an intellectual level scholars were showing that much could be observed by looking at what Matthew did with Mark. This was measurable. Synopses even allowed one to colour code the similarities and differences. Preachers could now expound texts with greater integrity rather than use them as though they were historical accounts, knowing all along the fragility (and falsity) of such claims, and for some a preaching text from Matthew now provided the option of exposition at three levels: the text itself, its version in Mark (where this applied or more tenuously in Q), and its likely original form.

The Primacy of the Text – Literary Analysis

Despite the rich harvest it provided the approach of understanding Matthew on the basis of Matthew’s use of Mark left some gaps. With both Matthew and Luke it could easily lead to neglect of the opening chapters of each in which, as was the pattern in ancient writings, their major themes and concerns were articulated or at least prefigured, as in an overture or Greek chorus. Partly in response to the inadequacies of the method but also partly still as a reaction to the depressing difficulties of reconstructing the historical Jesus some insisted that we should focus only on what we have, the received text, and not be distracted by speculation about what might have gone before it. Some even promoted this stance with missionary zeal declaring all other approaches invalid. We were to stop using texts as windows through which to see what lies on the other side, and stay with what is before us.

For some this was also a way of not only sidestepping the historical difficulty but also asserting the inspiration of the received text as the written Word. Now instead of biblical studies being the pioneer of interpretive method, which was taken up into humanities literature research, an opposite movement occurred. Literary analysis, developed largely to interpret fictional texts like novels, identifying their structures, plots, and characters, inspired new analyses of biblical writings. Some have been satisfied to treat the gospels as timeless texts, like works of art, which generate their own meaning anew in each generation, often making the point that as with works of art the creator’s original intent may be irrecoverable, or even irrelevant, and its historical context a curiosity with little bearing on what it does for us in the present. In the case of the Gospel according to Matthew, perhaps so named because it originated in a context where Matthew had some significance, we are dealing with an anonymous text, whose author we call “Matthew” for short, but the wisdom of literary studies reminds us that we do not have access to the author but only the text, nor to its first hearers, but only to recorded responses, and that all else is implication.

Ancient Rhetoric

Despite the turbulence which inevitably accompanies new claims and the occasional extravagant claims to sole validity, the shift of focus to the received text, using all the methods available, including those of cognate disciplines, was a major step forward. It went along also with a better appreciation of how composition was understood in the first century world. The gospel writers will have received some education in how to write for their context where people would not be sitting down reading their compositions, but would be in a community listening to them. Writing for listeners rather than readers meant that one needed to employ signals in the text, such as beginning and ending a section with similar words or statements (called an *inclusio*), to achieve what we do visually by creating paragraphs. These ancient writers were much more engaged in such rhetorical techniques than most writers are today. Especially in the first half of his work Matthew shows evidence of having worked hard to shape his material according to the rhetorical patterns of the time, such as forming statements into groups of three.

Matthew in the Context of Judaism

Faith does make claims about history, so that preachers but also people with natural curiosity for history, legitimately engage these texts at a number of levels, what they say in themselves but also what they might tell us of history. Rather than being opposed, literary critical method and historical critical method belong appropriately together in dealing with the gospels and Matthew, in particular.

The move towards seeing Matthew as a whole in itself and not just as a means to extract history nor as something to compare with its sources has been the major change which has shaped recent research. Alongside it and of almost equal significance has been the major revision and extension of our understanding of Judaism, which most have recognised a significant background for understanding Matthew. Part of that revision was the result of the discovery and publication of the collection of scrolls and fragments of scrolls found in the caves at Qumran by the Dead Sea. Full publication came only in the 1990s, nearly fifty years after most were discovered, but already in the preceding decades the major documents had been published. Some were clearly sectarian. Others were known to us as documents of the time or as biblical works. Some were not sectarian but previously unknown. There were also fragments of works which had been preserved only in later manuscripts in translation, such as the Enoch literature and *Jubilees*. The discovery of this library also stimulated renewed attention to the many Jewish writings produced in the second temple period which were not incorporated into the later Old Testament canon as well as to the voluminous works of Philo and Josephus and not least the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint.

Matthew and the Law/Torah

The renewed attention to contemporary Jewish literature underlined both the unity and diversity of second temple Judaism. Where it was once common to cite Jesus' forbidding oaths and divorce as instances which proved that Jesus was no longer advocating Torah observance (and so, for some, must belong to bedrock of historical tradition), we can now see that adherence to Torah did not mean that one could not propose different laws or changes. The *Temple Scroll* does just that without in any way setting Torah aside. Jesus was also not alone in advocating that one not use oaths. Rather than placing himself outside of Judaism by such teachings, Jesus or at least Matthew's Jesus sits well within the range of what could be considered faithfulness to Torah. Even Matthew's distinctive addition to Jesus' words about his poured out blood as being "for the remission of sins" (26:28) need not be read as implying abolition of the cult, since the death of righteous people could be deemed as vicarious without any such implication.

Covenantal Nomism and God's Grace

Another major development in understanding Judaism of the time which resulted from more careful reading of the texts was the abandonment of the stereotype of Judaism as a religion in which one made claims to be justified before God on the basis of human achievement. This had been the foil for proclaiming justification by faith, both over against Judaism and by Protestants over against Catholics and at worst contributed to the prejudice, which ended in bizarre and gruesome pogroms against Jews and finally the holocaust. We now find some of the best parallels to Paul's understanding of God's righteousness as saving generosity in the *Thanksgiving Scroll* at Qumran and to grace as preceding and enabling faith and obedience in Philo. The technical term, "covenantal nomism", expresses the common assumption that God in grace offered the saving relation in which one continues by following the divine gift of Torah as wisdom and instruction on how to live. This pattern was clearly recognisable in some of the streams of the early Christian movement, including Matthew's. Understanding Matthew's relation to Judaism has been greatly enhanced also by studies of Matthew from Jewish scholars. As with any issue which has connections with guilt and horror, there will always be the danger that some in reaction will seek to minimise reference to difference or conflict in their historical reconstructions without historical grounds.

Matthew - Abandoning Judaism?

At the beginning of our period there were some proposing that Matthew was probably a Gentile. A Jew, it was argued, would understand the parallelism in Zech 9:9 and so not have Jesus fulfil it by riding on both an ass and the foal of an ass (Matt 21:7), a challenging gymnastic feat, but this kind of exegesis was also at home within Judaism. It was also common for scholars to relegate incompatible passages to pre-Matthean tradition, such as the claim that not a stroke should pass from the Law (5:18), the command to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:5-6), and admission that the Pharisees rightly sit on the seat of Moses (23:2). The problem was that Matthew did retain these and that they must have made sense in his work as a whole in which they do not appear of views from which the author distances himself.

The move away from such a selective approach resulted in approaches to Matthew which took such texts seriously as part of the whole. Central to the debate has been the passage 5:17-20 in which Matthew's Jesus declares that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them. This had been read along the lines that to fulfil them in effect meant to replace them with a greater righteousness. The six topics in 5:21-48, introduced with the words, "You have heard that it was said", accordingly contrasted the Law with what now replaced it, namely Jesus' teaching. The apparent contradiction in 5:18 which insisted that not a stroke of the Law was to fall was explained away by reading the until clause as indicating fulfilment during or at the end of Jesus' life. Then 5:19 which scolded those who set even the least of these commandments aside and taught others to do so could be read as referring not to the Law but to Jesus' own teaching. Most scholars now see this as a misreading of 5:17-20, which, on the contrary, has Jesus strongly assert the validity of the Law. The contrasts in 5:21-48 are then not between the Law and Jesus' teaching but between how the Law was being heard and interpreted and how Jesus interpreted it, in which many of his emphases find parallels in Jewish literature of the period. Jewish scholars have no hesitation in recognising it as good Judaism.

Jesus, John the Baptist and Judgement

A literary approach which traces the development through the early chapters notes the coherence between the image of Jesus like Moses on the mountain expounding the Law and the Moses and Israel typology of the birth narratives and the temptation scene. It is particularly striking that

Matthew has John the Baptist announce the coming one as the judge who would demand goodness, burning up the wicked with fire, and has the baptismal scene announce Jesus as that coming one, who as his later allusion in 12:18-21 to the baptismal voice with its allusion to Isa 42:1-4 would declare will proclaim judgement to the peoples. When Matthew then has Jesus expounding the Law, he has him doing so as the judge to come, in advance setting forth what true Torah observance means. Each of Matthew's five discourses attributed to Jesus across the gospel has judgement as a theme, climaxing in the separation of the sheep from the goats. There is no differentiation: what Matthew portrays as Jesus' message to his contemporaries is now his message to all, including believers. Attitude and actions are the basis for judgement, not status.

It is equally striking that Matthew summarises the messages of John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples with the same words: "Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2; 4:17; 10:7), a revision of Mark's summary of Jesus' proclamation in Mark 1:15. The three are linked in the parables of the two sons, the vineyard, and wedding feast, which follow the expulsion from the temple (21:28 – 22:14). Matthew not only makes the summary of Jesus' preaching also the summary of John's, but takes up one of John's sayings to make it a saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (3:10; 7:19). John is more like Jesus in Matthew and Jesus more like John than in any other gospel. At the same time Matthew employs the Q tradition which has John confused that Jesus had not done what he predicted (11:2-6), to which Jesus replies by pointing to his interim ministry of healing and teaching. As the Christ he teaches and heals during his ministry and as judge he will call all to account. To declare heaven's reign where Rome's empire reigned brought Jesus to his death and some argue it is the elephant in the room in all the gospels, including Matthew. One could hardly escape confronting Rome's rule, which makes its appearance in Herod, Archelaus, Antipas, and Pilate, but is otherwise not given explicit mention as a theme.

Matthew's Relation to Judaism

In the sense that Matthew has Jesus demand obedience to Torah his gospel sits well within the framework of Judaism. At the same time Matthew shows Jesus in conflict with fellow Jews and this is likely to reflect tensions also between Matthew and his community and fellow Jews of their time. This has raised the complex issue of what kind of relationship that was, whether as a community they saw themselves as within Judaism as outside it or somewhere in between. On this opinions continue to differ.

It is not difficult to recognise that Matthew has its own distinctive approach to Torah. While according to 5:18 not a stroke of the Law is to fall, 5:19 differentiates between greater and lesser commandments. Jesus' comment in 23:23 about tithing illustrate the perspective: justice and love and faith matter most, but one should at the same time not neglect tithing of minutiae. Perhaps the same applies to circumcision though that is debated. Similarly there is a clear focus in the six topics which Matthew chooses to address in 5:21-48 on the ethical, and in particular on love and the essence of righteousness rather than cultic observance. This belongs within the range of emphases in Judaism of the time and need not imply separation, though it would produce conflict, as it did in the ministry of Jesus. It is noteworthy that Matthew elaborates Markan anecdotes about conflict to underline that Jesus' actions were justified on the basis of the Law (e.g. 9:9-13; 12:1-8; cf. Mark 2:13-17, 22-28). As noted above, the interpretation of Jesus' death as for the remission of sins need not imply rejection of the cult. In Matthew both John and Jesus bring (God's) forgiveness of sins during their ministries (3:6; 9:1-8).

Thus far one might argue that nothing precludes Matthew and his community seeing themselves within Judaism and being accepted. There are other elements which render that at least problematic. While it has been argued that Matthew and his community were not engaged in

mission to Gentiles, which might have created problems for such relations, most recognise such outreach as mandated in the closing scene, notably as a command to create learners who are to learn what Jesus had taught (in other words the content of Matthew's gospel) (28:18-20). A few see in this scene a frustrated Jesus abandoning Jews altogether (and read also 21:43 accordingly), but most take "nations" in an inclusive sense. Jesus' earlier instruction to his disciples not to go to the Gentiles but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:5-6), as he had done (15:24), is not a conservative relic with no relevance for Matthew, but an indication of a process of which Matthew is aware, and which in fact matches historical development according to which while Jesus saw his mission as to his own people, after his death the disciples had to confront the reality that it might spread more widely and when it did saw it as divinely sanctioned. It is significant that Mark represents this expansion symbolically by having Jesus' feeding of the 5000 and 4000 represent mission to Jews and Gentiles respectively (6:32-44; 8:1-11) and locates between them an anecdote in which it depicts Jesus as dismissing biblical purity and food laws, understood as a divisive barrier (7:1-23; cf. also 7:24-30). Matthew dismantles the symbolism (14:13-21; 15:29-38) and revises the anecdote so that it addresses only scruples about handwashing (15:1-20), thus leaving these strokes of the Law and the exclusiveness of Jesus' mission intact. Luke simply omits the offending material.

Most recognise that if Matthew and his community saw themselves as belonging within the frame of Judaism, it would have been amid conflict. He rolls together the Pharisees and Sadducees, whose leaders (not the whole Jewish populace) he largely blames for Jesus' death and the temple's destruction as punishment, by association tarring the synagogue leaders of his time, Pharisees, with the same brush. Acknowledgement of their authority seems apparent in Matt 23:2-3, suggesting a Jewish communal context which one might speculate could have been somewhere in Agrippa II's vast territory. In some respects to ask whether they were inside or outside Judaism might be misleading, as though the latter was a fixed or defined identity. The claims made about the person of Jesus, not so much the miraculous conception which had its Jewish parallels, nor the considerable use of apocalyptic colour enhancement Matthew employs, but Jesus' status as at least equal in authority to Torah and as embodying divine Wisdom (11:25-30; 23:34; cf. Luke 11:49) and being present like Shekinah (18:20) would have pushed relations to breaking point, such as had clearly occurred in the background of the fourth gospel. One might speculate that Matthew might have claimed not only to belong, but as bearing the interpretive tradition which should now lead the synagogue. The synagogue would surely not see it that way.

Matthew and the Church

Matthew's Jesus came to "save his people from their sins" (1:21). Clearly his saving work could not be narrowed to his death but was expressed, including as forgiveness of sins, throughout his ministry. It extended also beyond guilt to pointing to the need to keep the commandments not to earn salvation but to express it and remain in it. Even if at times Matthew uses opposite values such as threat of Gehenna to motivate assent, Matthew identified salvation's fulfilment through his many summaries and insertions as love and compassion (5:43; 7:12; 9:13; 12:7; 19:19; 22:34-40) and saw the church as standing in continuity with that mission, authorised through Peter and the disciples as Jesus was authorised (16:16-19; 28:18-20), also for its handling of internal conflict and discipline (18:15-20).

Select Reading List

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