



Section 1

Approaching the Gospel according to Matthew





I. THE STORY

Before us is a book of twenty-eight chapters which covers forty-five pages in my edition of the New International Version (hereafter *NIV*). It is the first document in the NT canon, which matches its pre-eminence throughout the church's history.¹ In that regard, the NT scholar Theodor Zahn found himself at a loss to find its equal in the literature of antiquity; and Ernest Renan, the historian of religion, called Matthew the most important book ever written.²

Beyond its monumental significance, the key background questions must be addressed. What sort of book – what kind of literature – is Matthew? Who is its author? On what basis – with what qualifications and for what purposes – does he write? Within what historical, literary and theological contexts does he stand? To whom and to what are he and his work indebted? For whom did he write? Are we among his intended readers? What effect can an ancient document from a foreign culture be expected to have upon us? Why, even given its long and distinguished history, should we take the time to read and study Matthew? Such are the major questions before us.

The Gospel according to Matthew takes the form of a story. The book contains much of Jesus' preaching and teaching, but it is all set within the framework, or drawn into the flow, of an underlying *narrative*.³

¹On the prominence of Matthew in the church's life from post-apostolic times onward, see France 1989: 13-20. Cf. Howard Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2003).

²These statements are cited in Morris 1992: 1.

³Bauer 1988: 142; Ryken 1987: 31; Combrink 1983: 61-90. The basic shape of Matthew is discernible in the other three gospels. All four offer, in the language of Luke 1:3 (*kathexēs*), an 'orderly account' of Jesus' life and work, whether order is conceived in temporal, spatial or logical terms (cf. BAGD



What story is being told? Answering this question calls for attention to *characters* and to *plot*. 'Characters are necessary for the actions which move the story along, but actions help define characters, so there is a dialectical relationship between plot and character in the Gospels.'⁴ Plot denotes the arrangement of episodes within a story, and the progress from one event to another down to a climax and a conclusion. 'Central to most plots is *conflict*, which provides movement and heightens the tension, leading to a climax of success or failure.'⁵ To what characters, then, are we here introduced? How do they help shape the story, and how are they affected by unfolding events and by other persons participating in them? How does the action progress from beginning to end? What conflicts are described, and what is their outcome? How are we affected as we move through the story to its climax and conclusion?

It should be observed that, as readers, we may be deeply moved, even radically changed, by a story without knowing who wrote it. But being affected that way, as innumerable readers of this story have been, heightens our interest in the *storyteller*, to whom we will turn our attention at the close of this section.

A. The Characters

The figure introduced in the opening verse ('Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham') remains central throughout the story. We learn about certain events of his life, including his birth in Bethlehem, his family's flight to Egypt and return to Galilee, his baptism in the Jordan River, his testing in the wilderness, his preaching and teaching and miracle-working in Galilee and Judea, his encounters with various individuals, his table fellowship with 'tax collectors and sinners', his conflicts with adversaries both human and demonic,

s.v. *kathexēs*). Each document, moreover, takes the form of a 'narrative' – Luke's language again (1:1, *diēgēsis*).

⁴E. V. McKnight, 'Literary Criticism,' *DJG*, 479.

⁵Burridge 1994: 19. Pratt 1990: 179 recalls Aristotle's definition of plot as 'the arrangement of incidents,' and Pratt himself speaks of 'plot, or dramatic flow, as the heightening or lessening of tension through the arrangement of scenes.'

his calling and training and commissioning of disciples, his transfiguration, his final journey to Jerusalem, his triumphal entry, his cleansing of the temple, his debates with the religious authorities, his last meal with the disciples, his agony in Gethsemane, his betrayal and arrest, his trial before Jewish and Roman courts, his crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead and his concluding commission to his followers.

All other characters are presented in relation to Jesus. We are early introduced to his distinguished ancestors and to Mary and Joseph, to King Herod and to magi from the east, to John the Baptist and to certain Pharisees and Sadducees. As the story unfolds we find three groups around Jesus: the crowd; the authorities, both religious and secular; and the disciples. There are also memorable representatives from each group, such as (respectively) a Jewish leper, a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman; Herod the tetrarch, Caiaphas the high priest and Pilate the Roman governor; and Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene and Judas Iscariot. There are also frequent references to Old Testament figures, such as Abraham, Noah, Moses, Elijah, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel and the Son of Man. Also featured in the story are non-human characters – angels, Satan and the demonic powers, God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

B. The Plot

The opening verse causes us to ask: Who is Jesus, and why is his story being told at such length? Why is he called ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of David’ and ‘Son of Abraham?’ The genealogy readies us for the arrival of a regal figure. Anticipation is heightened into wonder when we learn of the angel’s appearance to Joseph, and of the magi’s journey to Bethlehem. But both the magi and Jesus’ family must flee from Herod, and our joy over Jesus’ birth and deliverance is nearly eclipsed by the slaughter of the innocents. Even after Herod’s death, Judea remains a dangerous place, and Joseph takes his family to Galilee.

John the Baptist appears on the scene, announcing the dawn of God’s rule. We wonder how this event will affect Israel and her leaders, here addressed as ‘a brood of vipers’.

And we wonder, in view of John's prophecy, what Jesus is about to do, and why he receives John's baptism. The Son and Servant, now anointed by the Spirit and appointed by the Father, is led into battle with the devil; and we suspect, even as we celebrate Jesus' victory, that the war is not over.

Jesus' return to Galilee following John's imprisonment (4:12) recalls earlier dangers in Judea (2:16), and makes us wonder what is in store for Jesus, especially as his message is the same as John's (3:2; 4:17). Throughout the ministry on which he now embarks, Jesus does battle with demonic powers and says and does things that provoke opposition from the Pharisees and teachers of the law. On the surface of the ensuing chapters, there is an ebb and flow of tension both within and between episodes. But as the larger story progresses, the tension steadily builds. Jesus teaches his followers that adherence to him and to God's rule assures fierce opposition and puts their lives at risk (5:11-12; 10:16-23). Yet the fiercest hostility and the most blasphemous charges are directed at him, calling forth his sternest words of judgment (12:22-45). Toward the end of this period, following Peter's declaration that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God', Jesus expressly tells his disciples that he, like John, will suffer and die at the hands of the authorities.⁶

Soon thereafter, Jesus 'departed from Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan' (19:1). One reads the ensuing narrative with a mounting sense of impending disaster. Enlarging on his earlier prophecies, Jesus foretells his betrayal, mockery, flogging and death by crucifixion, (20:17-19). By the self-understanding implicit in his entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple, Jesus confirms his enemies' worst suspicions about him. Knowing that his parables of judgment, notably the one in which a vineyard's tenants slay the owner's son, are directed at them, the chief priests and the Pharisees look for a way to arrest him (21:33-46). In a series of debates, Jesus rebuts or deflects his antagonists' questions (about his and John's authority, paying taxes to Caesar, and life in the resurrection), then raises a

⁶See Matthew 16:13-21; 17:11-13, 22-23, with 14:1-12.

question of his own about Messiah's sonship. That paves the way for his devastating exposé of Pharisaic and scribal sins, and for his discourse on the future (in which he traces developments from present turmoil, foretells persecution but ultimate vindication for God's people, and depicts the horrors of Jerusalem's coming destruction (chapters 23–25).

Hereafter, the narrative swiftly moves to its climax. Jesus' enemies, now determined on a course of action, find a willing ally in Judas. Jesus interprets his anointing at Bethany as preparation for his burial. During his last meal with the disciples, he verbally and visibly portrays his approaching death. Following his anguished prayer in the garden, he is arrested, tried before Jewish and Roman authorities, sentenced to die and crucified (26:17-27:56). His enemies' triumph is complete. On his way to death, Jesus has been betrayed by one of his followers, denied by another and forsaken by them all (26:56). At the end, he is even abandoned by the One who had declared him to be his 'beloved Son' at the baptism and the transfiguration.⁷ We now better understand the baptism at the Jordan and the agony in Gethsemane. Yet even amid our sorrow over the crucifixion, we sense, especially if we have read Matthew carefully to this point, that it is God and Jesus, not their enemies, who have determined this outcome, that it was to this very end that Jesus embarked on his ministry, that this event is essential, if the promise of 1:21 is to be fulfilled, and thus that, in a real sense, Jesus' mission has succeeded in the very place it appears to have failed. In the very hour of his death, Jesus is the Father's obedient Son, as the centurion testifies (27:54).

But the story was not designed to end on Golgotha, as close attention to the foregoing narrative would have assured us. Each time Jesus foretold his suffering and death, he also promised that he would rise from the dead (16:21; 17:22; 20:19). His restoring a girl to life (9:23-26) foreshadows such an event, as do his promise of 'the sign of Jonah the prophet' (12:39-40; 16:4), his transfiguration (17:9) and his response to the Sadducees' question about the resurrection (22:29-32). And

⁷See Matthew 27:46, with 3:17 and 17:5.

so it happens. ‘He is not here, for he has been raised, just as he said,’ declares the angel, (28:6). The Father has vindicated his beloved Son, the suffering Servant, by raising him from the dead, and by this action has ratified and assured the saving effects of Jesus’ death.

The risen Jesus attends to his followers. As at the first, he summons them by his sovereign command, and he gathers them to a place of former instruction (28:7, 16; see 5:1). As before, they worship him (28:17; see 14:33). Again he commissions them. Only now, in keeping with the authority granted him, they are to go to ‘all the nations’ (28:18-20a; see 10:5-6). In accord with the name given him at the beginning, Jesus promises to be with them always, even to the close of the age (28:20b; see 1:23, ‘Immanuel’). With the sounding of the three major chords of victory, fulfillment and resolution, the story comes to a close.

C. The Storyteller

The teller of the story does not advertise himself, but keeps us focused on the plot and on the characters, especially on the story’s central figure. He does not reflect upon his psyche or feelings or troubled past. It is not his temperament or his personality that defines him, but the Christian community from which he wrote this book.⁸ What C. S. Lewis says about poets applies (*mutatis mutandis*) to him: ‘The poet is not a man who asks me to look at *him*; he is a man who says “look at that” and points; the more I follow the pointing of his finger the less I can possibly see of *him*.’⁹

From acquaintance with modern literature, we are accustomed to knowing who wrote the stories we read. Sometimes the story itself identifies the author, as in an

⁸In the ancient world, individuals were defined by the groups to which they belonged. Psychological factors were insignificant as explanations of human behavior. Ancients approved of the “individual” who represented group norms and values; modern westerners value those who stand out from the crowd.’ (Aune 1987: 28).

⁹Lewis and Tillyard 1939: 11. Lewis contends that a poet ‘does not express his own personality [His is] a voyage beyond the limits of his personal point of view, an annihilation of the brute fact of his own particular psychology rather than its assertion’ (ibid., 26-27).

autobiography, or a biography penned by an acquaintance of the subject. But often we must rely entirely on external sources for this information. In Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, an account of the nineteenth-century explorations of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, the author's name appears on the title page, but never in the story. We are likewise dependent on outside information for the identity of most novelists, for only rarely does such a writer assign himself a part, and identify himself by name within the story. Yet in other instances, from knowing about the author in advance, we can detect his personal traits and experiences in his characters.¹⁰

The book we are studying is both like and unlike such works. It is unlike them in that it comes from the ancient past; but like many of them in that it does not expressly identify its author. It is like them in that its authorship is attested from outside sources; it is unlike most of them in that this external evidence is strongly contested. In certain respects, it is like modern biography and historiography; but given its age, its claims and its motivation, it is distinguishable from both. It is emphatically not an ancient counterpart to a modern novel; but here, as with some novels, study of its text offers clues about the author's identity, experiences and purpose. Such are the matters to be addressed in the following sections.

¹⁰W. Somerset Maugham appears as himself in his novel *The Razor's Edge*. His name does not appear in *Of Human Bondage*; but he says in the Foreword that it is 'an autobiographical novel,' and its main figure, Philip Carey, is in many ways a self-portrait. One suspects that traits of Jane Austen's own character are often subtly present in her novels' heroines (e.g., in Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice*, and in Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*).